

The Artist as an Outcast and a Mother in *The Road to Mecca*

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Friendships among women are important themes for twentieth-century women writers like May Sarton, Marge Piercy, and Joyce Carol Oates. However, it is unusual to find a man exploring the complexities of women's relationships, which is precisely what Athol Fugard does in *The Road to Mecca* (first performed in 1984 at the Yale Repertory Theater). He uses the close friendship between Helen and Elsa to explore many issues, especially the isolation of the artist and other rebels and the ability of an artist to nurture younger friends. These universal themes enable the play to transcend mere character studies and to articulate the deepest needs of both men and women.

Mecca is based on the life of a reclusive widow named Helen Martins, who was a sculptor in the small town of New Bethesda. The local people regarded her as crazy. Fugard sees her situation as a paradigm for the life of any creative artist in a hostile environment. The action of this concise play is psychological: the characters' suffering and conflict lead them to new insights into their lives.

In the play Helen, who is in her late sixties, loves Elsa Barlow, a schoolteacher who is forty years younger, because Elsa can appreciate "Mecca," Helen's carefully decorated home and her statues. Despite the difference in their ages, the two women have a lot in common. Both are rebels against social conventions: Elsa teaches radical material to her black students, and Helen's exotic artwork defies the traditional pieties of Afrikaner life. Both women are childless and seek self-fulfillment outside of conventional motherhood. Both women have black friends

and sympathize with Patience, the widowed black woman with a baby whom Elsa finds walking alone across the Karoo.

Helen has summoned Elsa to New Bethesda from Cape Town because the artist is depressed: she feels alone and unable to complete her work. Helen needs Elsa to renew her faith in herself. Elsa is not just Helen's best friend: she is Helen's ideal audience as well.

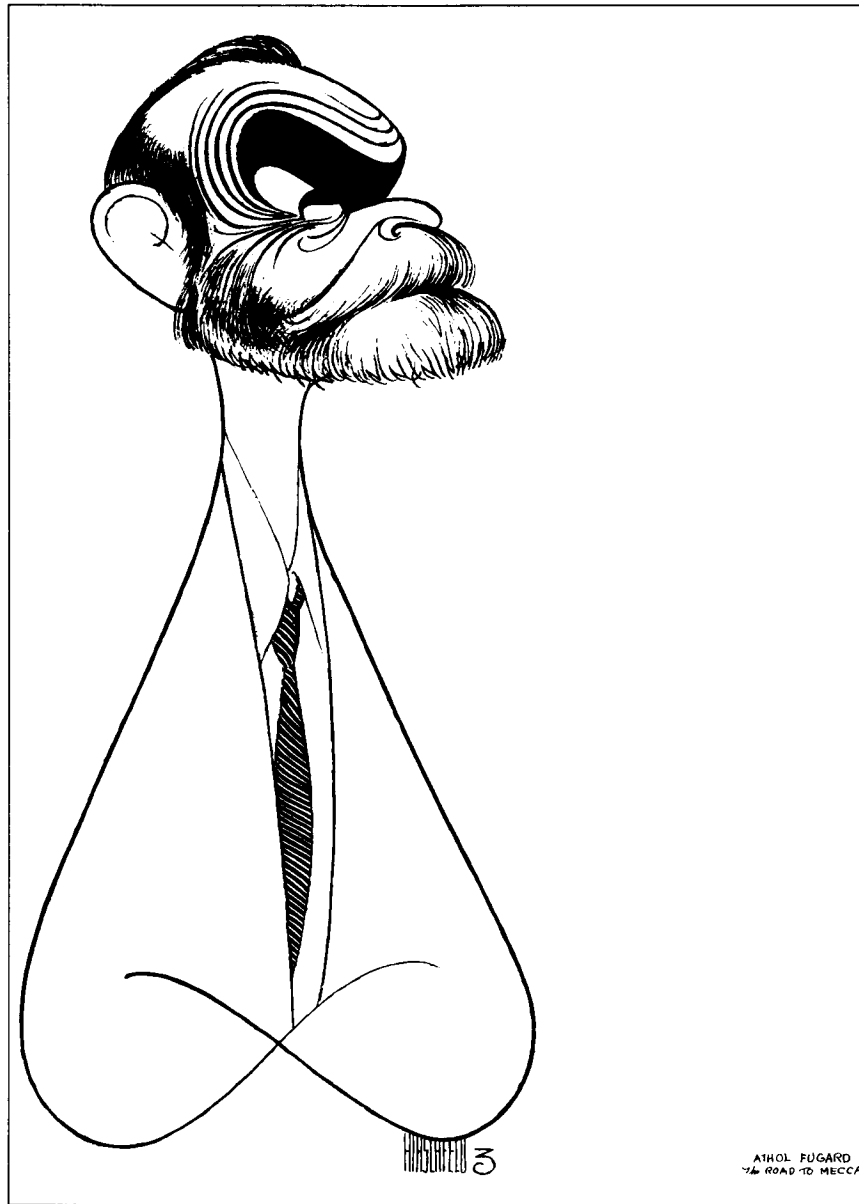
Although Elsa and Helen are the main characters, Marius Byleveld enters at the end of Act One and is present for most of Act Two. He wants to persuade Helen to retire to his church's home for the elderly. He is in the play to test the relationship between the two women and to test Helen's ability to make decisions for herself.

Fugard maintains the suspense for most of Act Two. Marius, jealous of Elsa's intimacy with Helen, tries to make Elsa feel like an ignorant and intrusive outsider who does not understand the Karoo and the traditions of its Afrikaner people. He uses the pronouns "we" and "our" to refer solely to the local white population, excluding Elsa. Marius constantly reminds Elsa that she is younger, is of British descent, and lacks a rural perspective. Elsa fights back by asking him about the level of satisfaction of the black people in the Karoo (43). Her questions undermine Marius's exclusive categories. Fugard also undermines Marius's snobbism by having the minister admit that he has spent only twenty years in the Karoo himself (46). Marius's best argument is that Helen and he are contemporaries who have been friends for a long time. Marius makes his strategy of isolating Elsa most clear when he says of the Karoo, "It is my world—and Helen's—and we can't expect an outsider to love or understand it as we do" (43).

These strategies implicitly question the basis of the friendship between Helen and Elsa. When Elsa leaves the room, Marius begins to question Helen directly about the women's relationship, which he views as a threat to his friendship with Helen.

Just as Marius attempts to subdue Elsa, he also tries to manipulate Helen rhetorically. He launches into long monologues, giving her very little time to respond to his scolding and cajoling. When Helen gently reprimands him, "Marius . . . please . . . please can I talk for a little bit now?" (51), he keeps interrupting her, making it hard for her to focus her thoughts and confront him.

At first Helen seems weak and passive to the audience. She has the typical problems of an older woman: her eyesight is bad and she suffers from arthritis. She also experiences bouts of depression and once nearly set her house on fire (57). Helen also appears unsure of herself: she allows Elsa and Marius to patronize and bully her.



AF in *The Road to Mecca*, as seen by Al Hirschfeld. (© 1988 Al Hirschfeld. Drawing reproduced by special arrangement with Hirschfeld's exclusive representative, the Margo Feiden Galleries Ltd., New York.)

The tide turns, however, in the middle of Act Two, when Elsa explains to Marius why Helen's art and life are so important and so frightening to the townspeople. The world stresses conformity, so most citizens fear and distrust anyone who has a freer life style and original ideas. The woman artist is even more of a threat to society than a male artist because women are supposed to subordinate themselves to men. Nonetheless, after the death of her husband Helen emancipated herself by turning to art and developing her inner vision. In a moving testimonial, Elsa praises Helen's nurturing power: "She challenges me into an awareness of myself and my life, of my responsibilities to both that I never had until I met her." Elsa terms Helen "the first truly free spirit I have ever known" (61).

Helen gains confidence from this testimonial, and she explains her Mecca to Marius. Helen firmly informs him that she cannot "reduce my world" to enter the old-age home (68). Marius leaves, unsuccessful in his attempt to disrupt the women's friendship and unsuccessful in his attempt to win power over Helen.

The last few moments of the play are entirely devoted to the strong relationship between Helen and Elsa. Like most friends who have been separated for a while, the two women tell each other about their troubles in Act One, but they both withhold important information. Helen hides the fact that her burns resulted from a suicide attempt. Similarly, Elsa tells Helen about the end of a liaison with a married man, but Elsa omits any mention of her subsequent pregnancy. Helen had suspected from the beginning that something was wrong with Elsa and that Elsa was leaving something out of her story about Patience and the baby (8). Finally, when the women are alone at the end of the drama, they have their most intimate conversation. Marius's harassment has, if anything, deepened the female bond. Elsa admits that she is depressed about having had an abortion. Just as Elsa understands Helen's art work, Helen understands the pain and ambivalence involved in Elsa's decision. This understanding helps Elsa to admit her grief and, for the first time, to cry about her betrayal by her lover and the loss of the child. Elsa's suffering leads her to realize the sisterhood of all women and the special role that Helen has had in her life: "Patience is my sister, you are our mother" (73). Though Helen is childless, she is spiritually a mother to Elsa. In another paradox, the physically weak Helen seems, at the end of *Mecca*, spiritually stronger than Elsa and Marius.

Just as Hally bullies Sam to assuage his anger against his father in "*Master Harold*" . . . and the boys, young Elsa has tried to bully Helen to

displace anger and grief over her relationships with David. Fugard seems to believe that the human tendency to transfer and displace such emotions makes all close relationships fragile, especially across the generations. In both plays the older generation demonstrates more strength of character and forbearance than the hot-tempered and impetuous young people. *Mecca*, however, has a more optimistic ending than "*Master Harold*": Helen and Elsa are reconciled, but Sam and Hally can never be close again.

Light and dark imagery dominates *Mecca*. For years Helen has lit candles in her home to dispel the darkness, but now in her old age she worries that the darkness has "got inside me at last" (37). Clearly the darkness represents Helen's fear of artistic impotence, old age, and death. But Elsa's testimonial to Helen's creative power renews the sculptor's faith in herself. Helen explains to Marius that by working on her *Mecca* she has achieved inner vision and has overcome her fear of darkness (68). Appreciating Helen's strength and wisdom, Marius exclaims as he leaves, "I've never seen you as happy as this! There is more light in you than in all your candles put together" (70). Elsa repeats this statement a few moments later to emphasize its importance (71). As the play ends, Helen walks around her home to put out her many candles (70–76). This activity symbolizes her acceptance of old age and the completion of her *Mecca*.

Thus both Helen and Elsa have confronted their problems squarely and have emerged from a period of intense suffering. By reaching out to one another they achieve greater insight into the meaning of their lives. The last few lines of dialogue affirm the two women's love and trust in one another.

This pattern of suffering, insight, and growth makes Fugard's plays different from those of his predecessor, Tennessee Williams. Although both playwrights are interested in conflict and psychological barriers in close relationships, while Williams's protagonists are often paralyzed emotionally by a traumatic experience and rely on illusions to survive, Fugard's characters face their traumas and illusions more squarely and achieve a greater self-understanding. In plays like *Mecca* this self-awareness allows close relationships to survive conflict.

Fugard uses Helen to express many of the frustrations of both male and female artists. Helen is treated like "a stranger" by most people in New Bethesda (53), and they throw stones at her house and her statues. Many artists feel misunderstood, and many feel persecuted by a hostile public that has a tendency to appreciate dead writers more than living ones. Fugard demonstrates in this play that, while artists appear crazy

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and unapproachable, their creative power, in fact, enables them to nurture others and to express universal longings. The ideal audience, like Elsa, comes to acknowledge the artist's prowess and to love and trust the artist's vision.