The Road to Mecca
by Athol Fugard • Directed by Leigh Silverman
January 15–February 14, 2009

plays +

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What’s this play about?

Helen, a sculptor of found objects, is getting too old to live alone. She lives in a remote area of South Africa—miles away from her nearest neighbors. Helen reveals her growing fears in a letter to her friend Elsa, a young schoolteacher. Elsa immediately makes the day-long drive to confront her. The women debate long into the night whether Helen should stay in her “Mecca” (the house she’s filled with her artwork) or follow her pastor’s advice and move to a home for the elderly. We see how much they depend upon one another spiritually and emotionally, and we glimpse the power of art and friendship to bring hope.

South Africa? Athol Fugard? Is this a play about race?

Although The Road to Mecca is set in apartheid South Africa (written in 1984), the play is only tangentially about race. Many of Fugard’s other works (Master Harold and the Boys, Valley Song) deal explicitly with relations between white and black South Africans. The Road to Mecca, however, focuses on the struggles of white South Africans, specifically the conservative nature of their rural, religious community—and how painful it can be to be ostracized by that community.

READ MORE South Africa and Fugard’s Creative Inspirations: www.seattlerep.org/offstage

Inspired by a true story

At 50, Helen Martins returned to her childhood home in rural South Africa. She was alone after the death of her parents. Knowing she needed a creative outlet, Helen began more than a decade of sculpting and building her own personal Mecca (based on the holiest city in Islam, where millions make an annual pilgrimage).

The choice to turn her home into an ever-evolving work of art was not without consequences. The small, religious community of Nieu-Bethesda, South Africa, deemed her work strange and sacrilegious and ostracized her. Over time, Helen became more reclusive. She suffered from arthritis and depression, which made it difficult for her to sculpt. After her death in 1976 at the age of 78, her home, nicknamed The Owl House, fell into disrepair. Fortunately, a group of community members brought it back to life, and today over 130,000 people make the out-of-the-way journey to visit Miss Helen’s home each year.

READ MORE Art from the Outside: www.seattlerep.org/offstage

One of the sculptures from The Owl House sculpture garden.

“The said she didn’t have plants but she grew beautiful statues.”

— Koos Malgas, a builder who worked with Helen Martins on her home

Fast Facts

• Director Leigh Silverman directed Blue Door here in 2007. At 33, she’s one of the youngest female directors to ever direct on Broadway (her production of Well premiered at the Public Theater in 2006).
• Marya Sea Kaminski (who plays Elsa) was Rachel Corrie here in 2007 and was awarded “Best Local Stage Actor” in 2008 by the readers of the Seattle Weekly.
• Dee Maaske (who plays Miss Helen) is celebrating her seventeenth season as a member of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival acting company.
• The set, designed by Rachel Hauck, is almost a fourth character in the play, depicting Miss Helen’s elaborate sculptures, mirrors, and candles.
• The Road to Mecca was turned into a movie in 1992 starring Kathy Bates and Fugard himself as Marius, the pastor.

THERE’S MORE ONLINE! Watch behind-the-scenes videos, meet the director, check out photo slideshows and read our blog: www.seattlerep.org/offstage.