

Long and winding road: Profile's "Mecca" is ultimately a rewarding trip

OSF veteran Eileen DeSandre points the way to freedom in Profile's Athol Fugard season

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Eileen DeSandre in Profile Theater's *The Road to Mecca*.
Photo: Jamie Bosworth.

"Can I speak a little now?" asks Miss Helen about midway in Act II of Profile Theater's intimate new production of "The Road to Mecca."

The diminutive, elderly South African woman has heretofore spent most of Athol Fugard's 1988 play absorbing the pleadings, harangues, and fulminations of the other two characters, who want her to be what they imagine. Marius, the minister of the small town where she was born and lived her long life, beseeches Helen to give up her ramshackle house and eccentric, solitary life (since the death of her husband 15 years earlier) and move into a church-sponsored retirement home. It's out of concern for her safety, he insists, but Marius—and the blinkered yet compassionate community he represents—harbors other motives, one of them not revealed till near the end.

Miss Helen's young friend Elsa, a bitter, 31-year-old feminist schoolteacher visiting from the big city (Cape-town), admires Helen's oddball sculptures (which have drawn stones from local children and scorn from their conformist parents) and independent, self-actualized artistic lifestyle. As we discover, she, too, has other, personal reasons for urging the older woman to resist the community's urgings to give up her life and home.

With all this backstory needing to be conveyed in sometimes tedious expository dialogue, we're halfway down the road to Mecca before Helen gets to say what she wants—and why. And that's where Profile's production really takes off.

Inspired by the story of Helen Martins (1897-1976), an artist who lived in Fugard's South African region and created The Owl House, now a national monument, the play explores the perennial struggle between social conformity and artistic freedom, not to mention issues of elder independence vs. safety, feminism vs. patriarchy, religion vs. individuality and more, even obliquely touching (more briefly than usual for Fugard) on cultural tensions not only between South Africa's whites and non-whites but also between English and Afrikaaner settlers.

With so many big ideas to convey, the dense script poses challenges for the actors who have to flesh out these archetypes. Despite a few opening night accent lapses, all three actors delivered precise, sometimes potent diction. Director Adriana Baer's decision to counter the script's leaden first-act pacing with crisp, rapid fire fu-sillades is understandable, but Elsa's (Amanda Soden) steely, unvarying vocal tempo and inflection eventually grew grating and made my ears glaze over. The dialogue needs room to breathe, especially in moments that clearly suggest a mid-monologue change of direction. By the time her character gets her cathartic moment in the second act, it felt forced and unpersuasive, though Soden otherwise does a nice job of suggesting Elsa's hidden vulnerability beneath the flint.

David Bodin makes Marius a surprisingly sympathetic foil, hinting at the complex passions underlying his compassionate facade. But what really makes "The Road to Mecca" worth the journey is Eileen DeSandré's Helen. Once Fugard gives the frail pariah her chance to express her own desires, repressed for decades by her marriage and stifling small-town narrow-mindedness, the familiar Oregon Shakespeare Festival veteran really captures the gentle, off centeredness of a visionary artist who really just wants to be free to create her version of beauty.

Wisely refraining from showing Helen's controversial alfresco sculptures themselves, Alan Schwanke's cleverly cluttered, evocative interior set suggests the artist's vision as effectively as DeSandré's wide-eyed, almost distracted sense of wonder. Like Elsa's dusty 12-hour drive to Helen's home, and the latter's own life journey, the audience's road to her Mecca must endure its longeurs and rough patches, but the destination makes the trip a rewarding one. It's a reminder of how the power of art can help us transcend conflicts and constraints that might otherwise paralyze us.