

Profile Theatre's artistic director's debut is radiant with 'The Road to Mecca'

By Holly Johnson | For The Oregonian/OregonLive
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The stage glitters with reflective light. Bottles and glass objects gleam on window ledges and other empty spaces. They're placed around lighted candles that cast a warm glow throughout Alan Schwanke's practical yet dream-like set for Profile Theatre's "The Road to Mecca." The colorful space might seem a shrine if the word-heavy play didn't pulse so ardently, so explosively, with feelings and ideas. Adriana Baer is the company's new artistic director, and in this her radiant Portland directing debut in the season presenting the works of South African playwright Athol Fugard, she demonstrates a firm but fluid hand as she joins scenes seamlessly, while encouraging her three actors to show their respective ranges of power. And the power of this trio seems to be plugged into some invisible energy source that never flags or fizzles.

They tell the story of Miss Helen (it is her unusual, makeshift house filled with bottles, candles and artful objects), an astonishing portrayal by the petite Eileen DeSandre. Helen, incongruously dressed in baggy sweater, white leggings and a summer housedress, is an aging, widowed South African sculptor who lives in a rural village in the country's Eastern Cape. Helen is standing at a crossroads, and DeSandre, a marvelous, chameleon-like actor who has performed for many seasons with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, gives us plenty of time to see the character unfold and hang her dilemma out to dry for all to observe. With her tiny size, strong facial features and penetrating eyes, she's a bit birdlike. Yet her stage presence is so powerful that she at times, towers over the other actors. It's very hard to take your eyes off her.

Two friends who try to help and understand her are Elsa, 31, (a powerhouse performance by Amanda Soden), a rebellious teacher with a social conscience, and the conservative Rev. Marius (the wonderful David Bodin), who is dazzled by Helen, yet disapproving of her. Soden at first comes on full force and you wonder how much bigger her character can get, when she brings us to tears during a crucial moment in the play (Fugard is very effective at creating these). It's a cry of anguish, an emotional purge and a revelation rolled into one, and Soden as an actor finds the right cadences to work up to this moment.



Eileen DeSandre as Miss Helen in Profile Theatre's production of "The Road to Mecca" by Athol Fugard, playing Jan. 12-Feb. 3 at Theater! Theatre!

Bodin, with his guttural, musical Afrikaaner accent, is another marvelous presence, coming in at the very last moment of the first act, and becoming integral to the second.

“There is more light in you than all your candles put together,” he says of Miss Helen with surprising reverence and admiration. He’s tall, and when he stands next to her, she looks elfin, ethereal and a bit helpless. She’s getting frail, arthritic and a few things have happened indicating it might be dangerous for her to live alone. Should she move to an old-age home and give up her strange house dotted with sculptures of owls, peacocks, mermaids and the three wise men, all of facing east to Mecca? He says yes, Elsa vehemently says no.

The real revelation here is Miss Helen’s discovery of her own strength, her own acceptance of that darkness that will eventually come, unaided by the light of candles. But, in the meantime, cherish the luminosity while yet ye may.

Sound designer Sharath Patel has done much to augment the emotional movement and suspense of this Ibsenque play with sound effects resembling unfinished music, elongated notes, swaths of sound swelling then flattening, sometimes like vocal anguish or keening. My theater companion didn’t even hear them, at first, because they were so integral to the play.

It’s interesting to note that Fugard was inspired by the real-life story of Helen Martins (1897-1976), who was obsessive about decorating her home and garden in South Africa, using cement, glass and wire for decorating and building sculptures inspired from the works of William Blake (another obsessive), the Bible and other sources. Her place became a museum called The Owl House, and was declared a provisional national monument in 1991.

“The Road to Mecca” was made into a 1992 film starring Yvonne Bryceland, Kathy Bates and Fugard himself. A 2011 Broadway production starred Rosemary Harris and Carla Gugino. After originating at London’s National Theater, in 1988, the piece won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best foreign play.

-- Holly Johnson