



SOUTH AFRICAN SAGA: (left to right) Jim Dale, Carla Gugino, Rosemary Harris in *The Road to Mecca*, a drama set in the apartheid era. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

***Road to Mecca* revival: Angst & aging in apartheid- era South Africa**

THE ROAD TO MECCA

By Athol Fugard

Directed by Gordon Edelstein

Through March 4, 2012

American Airlines Theatre

227 West 42nd Street, (212-239-6200)

www.roundabouttheatre.org

By David NouNou

Rosemary Harris is a legend, and anyone who has ever seen her perform onstage knows that she is imbued with theatrical magic. However, even with all her wizardry, artistry, and ability to enchant, she cannot save this dreary and talky revival of Athol Fugard's 1988 Off-Broadway drama, taking place in 1974 in a small Karoo village in New Bethesda, South Africa, in the apartheid era.

Although the topics touched here are universal (old age and loneliness, the young and their angst, trust, faith, and friendship), the play lacks the compelling narrative so desperately needed. Elderly Afrikaner Miss Helen (Rosemary Harris) has health problems, and lives alone in a kitsch-filled house. She sends for her much-younger and trusted friend, the English South

African Elsa Barlow (Carla Gugino) because the village Dutch Reformed Church priest, Marius Byleveld (Jim Dale), and the rest of the white Afrikaner villagers want to send Miss Helen to an old age home run by the church for her own good.

It seems that Miss Helen had started a fire in her home four weeks earlier and she had to be rescued, and now the villagers feel she is a threat to herself and want her to give up the house that she has decorated herself with her garish artwork since her husband's death 15 years earlier. However, she is not ready to surrender her life to old age and give up her home and her beloved creations. So Elsa has traveled all the way from Cape Town to give Miss Helen the courage to stand up for herself from being committed by the narrow-minded townsfolk.

The play is rather stilted, but it has its redemptions. These are in the form of the three excellent performances. Miss Harris is brilliant as usual, and she absolutely radiates and mesmerizes us as the aging Miss Helen. What could have easily come across as mawkish with a lesser actress, Miss Harris fills Helen with a glow and dignity that is ultimately touching and rings with veracity. The equally superb Carla Gugino, as the younger friend Elsa, has never been better. Ms. Gugino is often incandescent in the role, delivering her lines with razor-sharp conviction, and she is beginning to find her aura on stage. Mr. Dale, as the two-faced priest, gives another one of his masterful and riveting performances.

Because of its predictability and the dated nature of the play, in lesser hands than the above-mentioned trio, the evening would have been interminable. As it is, *The Road to Mecca* seems more like the road to purgatory, but the top-notch actors all help make this long-winded, verbose drama bearable.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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