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THE ROAD TO MECCA ** 1/2 out of **** ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY

It's so difficult not to lose your shirt when producing theater that one feels churlish wishing a revival of Athol Fugard's drama The Road To Mecca were in a tinier, Off Broadway house. The American Airlines Theatre is hardly sprawling -- it's the fourth smallest house on the Great White Way. And yet even it feels too large for this intimate, modest, three person drama.

Fugard's tale is a simple one. Miss Helen (the great Rosemary Harris) is an elderly widow who lives on her own in an isolated town in South Africa in 1974. Since her husband died 15 years earlier, she's been creating what we would call folk art, fantastical (or monstrous) cement figures that fill her yard and home until there's not enough room for even a radish to grow. We take this on faith since unlike the original New York production, none of those giant, disturbing sculptures are visible to us. Al we see is a warm, expansive home with lots of candles, small hand-crafted works throughout, a glittering ceiling (created with ground-up beer bottles) and walls painted with streaks of orange and blue. To us it seems warm and inviting; to her fellow Afrikaners at the time, the word they would use would be closer to unhinged.

Miss Helen receives an unexpected visitor -- the English South African schoolteacher Elsa (a fine Carla Gugino), an English woman of South Africa being considered inherently freer, more modern, less "traditional" than an Afrikaner like Miss Helen. They are also, of course, from different generations. (This is not a play that focuses on race and prejudice, though of course every play of Fugard has such reality woven throughout it.) Miss Helen needs Elsa's support because the local man of the cloth Marius (an excellent Jim Dale) is coming to get her signature on a consent form so Miss Helen can be moved into an old folk's home.

Essentially, we spend the first half of the play hearing hints about a mysterious letter from Miss Helen, tragic events of 15 years ago, problems for Elsa and the looming, threatening appearance of Marius. In the second half, we discover exactly what happened 15 years ago, the contents of that letter, the unhappy state of Elsa's life and a showdown where the three of them sort out their complicated feelings for one another.

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It's quiet, sometimes affecting and directed smoothly if not piercingly by Gordon Edelstein. The set by Michael Yeargan perhaps could have been more of a presence to give us a better sense of Miss Helen's significance as an artist. The lighting by Peter Kaczorowski felt a little abrupt. Suddenly the stage would seem far dimmer than a moment earlier and then a character would comment that the sun was setting. Snuffing out one candle at one or two points had a similarly dramatic effect, rather than the subtle one called for.

The three actors prove themselves capable of a great deal, even if this production doesn't make the most of Fugard's play. Gugino really impressed me at first, but my confidence wavered as the show went on. Perhaps it's just a modern, savvier attitude towards the elderly, but Elsa seemed rather clueless and mean to Miss Helen at times. And her character's big moment felt tacked on after it seemed to me the business of the show was over. I felt alternately a bit annoyed and a bit confused by this woman. When a show is three quarters of the way over and you're still trying to puzzle out the dynamics between these two characters, something is wrong. (How long have they known each other? Is Elsa like a daughter? A friend? A crutch? And why exactly does Elsa travel so far to visit this woman? And if the friendship of Miss Helen means so much, why does Elsa complain about coming on short notice for what is clearly a crisis?)

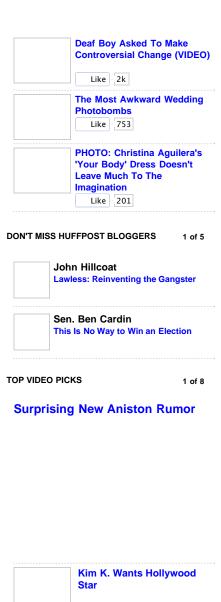
Harris had a better time as Miss Helen, but I was never quite sure what we were supposed to think of this woman either. Was she a talented artist? (The show is based on the life of a real Afrikaner whose home is now a national monument, so presumably that's the intent.) For all we know, her sculpture might indeed just be a hobby, albeit an admirable one. Even the intriguing modernist poster for this production is bolder than anything we see from Miss Helen. At times she appears a confused frail old woman while at other points she's a vibrant figure who knows exactly who she is. Characters can contain contradictions of course, but in this case it seemed the show that was confused, not Miss Helen.

But Dale was a revelation to me, never having had the chance to see him onstage before, I think. His Marius is crystal clear every step of the way. We're told he's a scheming man trying to oust Helen from her home. But when he arrives we find a reasonable, if mannered fellow who might just have her best interests at heart. Dale slowly reveals layers and layers to deepen our understanding of this man, as opposed to our whipsaw emotions about the two women.

Each has strong moments and the three of them make it a show worth seeing. But I can't help preferring it was in a smaller space that would allow these three actors (who never overact, mind you) the intimacy the piece calls for. And I wish this production had developed a clearer idea of these two women so we could see Fugard's play more clearly as well.

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