

What a drag it is getting old

 By Johann Smith

24 May 2011

I once had the privilege of having a tête-à-tête with Hannes Smith, Namibian journalist, muckraker, animal lover and enigma, in his late stages of Alzheimer's. Of the many colourful stories and anecdotes of Hitler and the first tarred road he recalled in his 50 years of reporting, he told me of a bitter-sweet affair of his first love. Midway through, he stopped. Waiting with an insatiable urge, I implored him to carry on. He replied with those tear-filled glassy eyes that only elderly folks have and muttered to the ceiling: "Do you want me to cry?"



Regret always comes too late, when the full definition time is grasped. Or so they tell me. The nihilistic parting words of Garth (Sean Taylor) protagonist, social polemicist, playwright, and a real bastard you hate to love sums it up best in *The Bird Watchers*: "The remorse we experience when we look back to the past when we're old."

Wisdom in hindsight

I haven't spoiled the play for you. Any elder good with wise words could tell you the same. The plot is straightforward enough. The set faithfully creates an atmosphere. The sound of birds become more than merely a backing track. The performances work in unison with the writing, as can be expected from experienced and accomplished actors. They do a good job of not standing out.

The key of *The Bird Watchers* is the wisdom of the story. Wisdom that comes only with the advantage of hindsight at the end of life. And its power, the distillation of time and memory, when all that's left to conquer is death. The moment when the grave comes as a welcome respite from the ever-growing regrets.

Love and hate



The play opens on an idyll - Garth drinking a glass of wine under a great tree on a farm in PE with his friend and fellow playwright, Lenny (Guy de Lancey). In these carefree moments Garth teaches Lenny how to spot birds. Ross (Dorothy Ann Gould) enters later and she completes the triangle. She is an actress, in love with Garth and beloved of Lenny, whose interest in her remains unrequited. For obvious reasons. Garth is the main *konyn*, goes off on tangents, directing the moments, the beauty, the humour, the triangle.

Drawn into his orbit, they hate and love him for his abilities, but are powerless to overcome the gravity of his personality. Of this he is fully aware and it is a role that he relishes for the time being - at one time referring to himself as a god.

Resemblance of a deity

Though it may have been said in jest, Garth does resemble a deity of some sort. His cup overflows with knowledge, wealth, fame and power. The success of his plays have granted him a room at The New York Plaza. Something his two friends can only dream of. And they can only offer their love, friendship and company, but are unable to reach him. Lenny ends the first act with these decapitating words: "You, me and Ross, it's pointless." To him they are a irritation, clashing the sphere of his ever-expanding ego.

The second act opens 30 years later. The beautiful green tree under which they once sat is merely a stump, the grass gone. Garth is old. Time for regret to make an entrance. Lenny and Ross enter his consciousness as ghosts, they've come to claim their pound of flesh.

Not an easy play to digest

This is not an easy play to digest from a 20-something-year-old's point of view. *The Bird Watchers*, is a miserable play, a real sore, old-age blues. The worst god-forsaken feeling. That remorse we have of the past when we're old and the only people who can forgive are dead or gone.

A simple thought that cuts deeper that I can understand at this time in my life. Next month Athol Fugard will receive a lifetime award in New York. In the programme, Athol writes that he didn't base this play on anyone specifically. And the situation is universal, we've all had friendships we've taken for granted or have outgrown. But something makes me think this might be a bit personal. Not least, that the title comes from Fugard's time spend with real friends bird watching. Is this a clue to a confession or am I just looking for evidence? Regardless, one has to wonder where his inspiration came from.

Athol Fugard's latest world première, The Bird Watchers will be staged at the Fugard Theatre until 4 June.

www.thefugard.com

ABOUT JOHANN SMITH

Johann MSmith is a music journalist turned content hacker. Known as the IDMMAG launch designer, Johann specialises in entertainment, travel and social commentary. Or as he puts it: "I speak as and for companies through social and design."

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