



Sometimes heavy-handed, contrast is bright moments

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of Athol Fugard's "The Road to Mecca" continue through Sunday, March 26 on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

South African playwright Athol Fugard has few contemporary peers. The dramatist who wrote the acclaimed "Master Harold and the Boys" weaves together plot, character and language with acknowledged mastery, but in "The Road to Mecca" words — splendid though they may be — can't compensate for the poverty of action.

Terence Kilburn, who directs the Meadow Brook production, does what he can to instill action in the three-character, one-set play that, despite its profound ideas and admitted charm, almost runs aground on the old shambles of too much "tell" and too little "show."

This least political of Fugard's plays unravels a crisis in the life of Helen Martins, an aging African woman who "didn't resign herself to being a meek, church-going little yidow" when her husband died. Instead she became an artist who celebrates light and sculpts creations the townspeople call grotesque monstrosities.

With sensitivity and a refreshing lack of cliché, Fugard's play challenges conventional ideas about artistic freedom, religion, conformity and aging. The Meadow Brook Theatre's mixed production has moments that shine as brightly, as the theater's very best, but the play's

minimal action and the production's sometimes-heavy-handed characterizations of Helen and her young schoolteacher friend, Elsa Barlow, dull the glow of those moments.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR Kilburn has Barlow wander into the bedroom to change clothes four or five times in the course of an evening. The audience craves action, so why not have Elsa change clothes as often as a teenager? Watching the full-bodied Miss Barlow don and discard clothes offers a pleasing sight in lieu of real action.

Set designer Peter Hicks creates a magical room that blends the rosy colors of a desert sunrise and sets them shimmering with shards of stars in a dawn sky. The room, which Helen the artist created, reflects her vision. Theatrical magic happens when she lights a few candles and the room that is her personal Mecca comes alive with light and a primitive, whimsical wonder. Then, character, theme and set converge for a magical moment of theater not easily forgotten.

Anne Sheldon plays Helen as a Grandma Moses kind of artist facing failing eyesight, arthritic hands and the encroaching frailty of age. Sheldon's Helen is innocent, sweet and kind — but not nearly tough enough to have challenged the bigotry of righteous religion or to exercise artistic freedom amidst the provincial prejudices of a small South African town.

The minister, played by William Le Massena with assurance that his white, masculine, majority opinion

prevails, tries to persuade Helen she is too old to live in her house among her idolatrous creations. He wants her to move to the town old folks home.

Under the pressure of age and uncertainty, Helen becomes a whimpering wretch who sits hunched in a chair like a helpless child with no control over her destiny, her feet suddenly pigeon-toed in an overdone picture of angry passivity.

WHICH ARE WE TO BELIEVE? That Helen really is a heroine with the strength to defy the conventions of a provincial town and its religion? Or that she is the passive old woman thoroughly discomfited by minor frailties of age? Sheldon creates an endearing and lovable Helen. If only she didn't make Helen a wimp as well.

Mary Walworth, as Helen's younger friend Elsa Barlow, projects a tough and angry stubbornness that belies the uncertainties and ambiguities festering beneath her surface.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.

'Anything Goes' a lively show in hands of the Troy Players

Performances of "Anything Goes," presented by the Troy Players, continue through Saturday, March 18, at the Troy Community Center. For ticket information call 879-1285.

The Troy Players production of "Anything Goes," directed by Connie Patrick, is high spirited. The cast and crew have a rousing time singing Cole Porter's wonderful songs and their sense of fun carries across the footlights.

The witty script by Guy Bolton, P.G. Wodehouse, Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse is filled with colorful characters, clever wordplay on English and American expressions, and the fast, balmy plotting that went into Wodehouse's "Jeeves" books.

There's even a Monty Pythonesque Englishman, Lord Evelyn, hilariously played by tall, thin Bill Hellebuyck. As Evelyn, he moves from being naughty to having hot pants in the course of a cruise from New York to London and winds up marrying a nightclub singer.

Diane Stinnett is Reno Sweeney, the nightclub singer who outgrows her wicked past and falls for Lord Evelyn. Stinnett has stage presence and a strong voice. She is believable as the brassy redhead who belts out "I Get A Kick Out of You," "Let's Misbehave" and "You're Rockin' the Boat" in the Times Square mission house in "Guys and Dolls," as Stinnett and the entire cast threw



themselves into "Blow, Gabriel, Blow." The ship where the action takes place seemed to be rocking on the Atlantic Ocean.

Jeremy Bowen as Moonface, Public Enemy No. 13 who has aspirations to being No. 1, nearly steals the show. Bowen has speed, verve, a real sense of comedy, and we're not surprised to learn he isn't a public enemy at the finale. As a padre who doesn't know the first thing about religion, he's crazy funny. Bowen's energy carries the show, along with Viki Georges, who's wonderful as Bonnie, the fireball who sneaks aboard with "Mooney." Georges' vivacity adds much to the show.

Kevin Marsce as Billy Crocker,

the bright young man who is in love with a proper girl, and who introduces himself as George Bernard Shaw to proper people, carries himself well. Marsce, a handsome young man, is very funny when using variously a Chinese, French or Spanish accent. Fortunately, the script makes ample use of Marsce's flair for accents.

Alex Highland carries herself straight as a ramrod as proper Hope, the girl who winds up with Billy after nearly marrying Lord Evelyn. We can see that her strength of character comes from Mother, Mrs. Harcourt, well played by Linda Wojtzechowski.



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