

### **The Shadow of the Hummingbird.**

Athol Fugard. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2015. 96 pp.

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According to the blurb from *Time* on the cover of *The Shadow of the Hummingbird*, Athol Fugard is “the greatest living playwright in the English-speaking world.” Indeed, Fugard does have an impressive oeuvre, acknowledged especially for his works like *Nongogo* (1959), *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* (1972), and *My Children! My Africa!* (1989) which sharply criticize the apartheid regime.

Despite having lived in the United States for some years, Fugard has always been unequivocally loyal to South Africa. In the foreword to this play he states that, although *The Shadow of the Hummingbird* had premiered in Connecticut and was received well in the USA, he felt that the South African production is the definitive version.

As with *Master Harold... and the Boys* (1982) Fugard bases *The Shadow of the Hummingbird* on his own life experiences. Like Fugard, Oupa is a South African in his eighties who has relocated to the United States. The play is set in Oupa’s small, sunny apartment where his grandson, Boba, comes and visits him in secret. The relationship between Oupa and his son (Boba’s father) seems to have soured, but he and Boba both cherish the special relationship that they have. The play starts with a prologue by Paula Fourie which shows Oupa alone in his apartment, rummaging through his old

notebooks, looking for a very specific diary entry that he had made some years before. As he searches, the audience (or in this case, the reader) is shown glimpses from Fugard’s actual diary entries since there is a significant overlap between dramatist and character. As Fugard (and Fourie) confirms in the foreword to the play: “As Paula often points out—Oupa is not Athol Fugard, and yet he is” (8).

Oupa finally finds the diary entry that he was looking for, dating from December 1963. It articulates the philosophical significance of shadows:

First my mind consciously analyses the phenomenon of a shadow, and assures me that a shadow is nothing. Then with my eyes, with all the senses of my living mortal body, I look at ‘it’—‘it’—and savour the beauty of its being. Yet it is nothing. My mind has told me so, and proved it. And then my wonder increases, encompassing now not only the beauty of the shadow but the duplicity, the paradox that runs so richly through all this life. (32)

Boba interrupts his grandfather’s reverie with his usual visit. Oupa tells Boba stories about South Africa, they discuss Boba’s parents and Oupa listens with great excitement as Boba reads a story that he has written himself out loud. Oupa takes the education of his grandson very seriously and also continues to explain the image of the shadow in Plato’s *The Republic*. Oupa shares with Boba his wish that, before he finally expires, he can regain the innocence of a child and perceive a shadow to be real.

The play therefore investigates questions about reality versus perception, imagination, childlike innocence, and the love between a grandson and grandfather through the central motif of the shadow of a hummingbird that is hovering outside Oupa's window.

This play is thus aimed at a wide audience and especially at Fugard's established fan base who would be interested in the intersections between the character of Oupa and the playwright himself. Their possible expectation of nostalgic references to South Africa is also fulfilled. However, one has to wonder if the play would have any appeal outside of this rather self-indulgent context.

The prologue is too reliant on Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) to be really interesting or innovative. The repeated references to South Africa and Afrikaans also seem forced. Oupa wears an "old green and gold woollen cap... the colours of the Springbok rugby team" (19), he makes a muttered reference to the political situation in South Africa, and he sings a fragment of an Afrikaans song to himself. While an American audience might appreciate these references to Oupa's exotic origins, a South African audience does not need these reminders.

One of the main differences between the American and South African versions of the play is Boba's age. While the character was portrayed by ten-year-old twins (Aiden and Dermot McMillan) in the American version, Marviantoz Baker, an actor in his twenties, performed the role in the South African version. According to Fugard's foreword, this

enabled him and Fourie to adapt Boba's age to thirteen which, in turn, allowed them to make the boy's presence in the play "more substantial" (9).

Boba's age is, however, the greatest weakness of the play, both in the text and the performance that I saw at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, on 3 August 2014. In performance, the audience is confused about Boba's age. An actor in his twenties simply does not convince as a boy or even a teenager. Boba furthermore does not behave like a thirteen-year-old would. While he rolls his eyes when his grandfather wants to play "monsters" (34), he refers to Plato as "Mr. Plato" (46). The story that he writes, "The predicament of Percy the dragon," starts with the words "Once upon a time, but not so long ago, lived Percy the orange dragon" (46). This seems a bit naïve and childlike. Boba furthermore buys too easily into his grandfather's fantasies of regained innocence. The unrealistic portrayal of a thirteen-year-old boy therefore impedes the audience's and the reader's suspension of disbelief when watching or reading the play.

Although the main themes of the play are interesting and widely appealing, *The Shadow of the Hummingbird* would possibly not have made it to the stage or the publishing press if it was not written by "the greatest active playwright in the English-speaking world."

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