

ENTERTAINMENT TODAY, 8/13/04

TICKETHOLDERS

by Travis Michael Holder

Exits and Entrances

Fountain Theatre

The Fountain Theatre's world premiere of Athol Fugard's newest masterpiece, *Exits and Entrances*, brings us one of the most impressive plays—and featuring one of the most amazing performances—of the year. Ironically, in a town where theater is hardly the most important artform to many, the three most impressive productions to sell out houses and light up the LA stages so far this season all revolve around theatrical themes: *Stage Directions* at [Inside the] the Ford and the Odyssey, *Theater District* at the Black Dahlia, and now this rare and intimate backstage look at the both big and small life of an aging South African stage star.

Set in the late 50s and early 60s, *Exits and Entrances*, under the superb direction of the Fountain's co-artistic director Stephen Sachs, is Fugard at his most autobiographical. It is based on his own friendship at that time with South African actor Andre Huguenet, a well known and highly respected performer and producer who had hired the youthful Fugard to play a small role in his touring production of *Oedipus Rex* with the understanding that the young man would also act as his personal dresser during the show. Just beginning to tentatively explore his own career in playwrighting, the Fugard character, played with exquisite simplicity by William Dennis Hurley, soaks up the knowledge offered by the overly dramatic and grandly effusive Huguenet like a sponge, his respect and worship of the older man apparent in his every line. *Exits and Entrances* is a more serious, though equally poignant, investigation of the themes explored by David Mamet in *A Life in the Theatre*. "What do you play for, Andre?" the apprentice asks his mentor at one point. "Nothing much," Huguenet answers, "just a little courage."

As the relationship grows between these two highly contrasted but equally passionate artists, it soon becomes clear that Huguenet's career is beginning to crumble. Bankruptcy follows the financially ruinous tour of *Oedipus* and, the next time the playwright comes to see his friend acting in a play, he is himself a young father with a promising writing career. What Fugard has created is a bittersweet and quietly monumental chronicle of the great loneliness and the great exhilaration of a career devoted to the stage. "I briefly escape my curse," Huguenet tells his friend, "by pretending to be a man who can't escape his." His struggle to find meaning and dignity as he suffers the "calamity of a too-long life," as his creativity dwindles from exhaustion and his lifelong efforts as an artist are being roundly overlooked, is both heartbreaking and reaffirming. The theater is more than a job for this man, it is his entire life. "I've even come to love the taste of stage blood dripping from my face," he admits to the young man, who in turn asks his friend what home means to him, prompting Huguenet to simply hold up a blank sheet of paper. Onstage, he can suddenly become a king or a god, or whomever he is asked to portray. "My greatest security in myself lies in becoming someone else," he realizes.

As wonderful as Hurley is as the Fugard character, he is understandably overshadowed by the performance of Morlan Higgins as Huguenet, who is simply breathtaking in the role. Of course, it's also a grand role, created as a loving tribute to the memory of a forgotten genius who so influenced the life of a great man himself, perhaps the greatest living playwright of our time. But Higgins' ability to so brutally pull out the stops and bravely scratch at the tremendous sorrow and humiliation of this once proud actor is more like channeling his subject than portraying him. It is an indelible performance by one of our town's hardest working and most impassioned actors who, like so many of us Hollywood survivors of a certain age and limited success, is himself often professionally overlooked but endures by never giving up his craft—or his ardor to create at any cost.

The most wondrous thing about great art is how it can influence each of us in a different, intensely personal way. Suffice to say, *Exits and Entrances* resonated significantly in my own experiences right now, quietly sweeping away all the hollowness and despair I was feeling as I was ending my time performing in Chuck Mee's challenging *Summertime* at the Boston Court. Suddenly not being in a play after a transcendent few months working on such a magical project is always a tough transition for me, usually threatening to lead me into one of those potentially dark periods when I spend a lot of time wondering what the hell I'm doing with my life. Athol Fugard's brilliant and insightful *Exits and Entrances*, energized by Morlan Higgins' incomparable performance, instantly renewed my covenant to keep being a stupid old fool who refuses to give up. For tickets, call (323) 663-1525.

Victorious

Hysterica Dance Co. at the Open Fist

I don't know where a modern dance presentation fits into the scheme of things, but the startlingly innovative *Victorious*, a decidedly no-rules work premiering at the Open Fist galvanized by the knockout choreography of Hysterica Dance Company's artistic director Kitty McNamee, is a remarkably exciting event for LA, where her troupe is based. Electric, daring, incredibly imaginative and highly erotic, I watched the abstract evening-length depiction of what McNamee refers to as a "clash of cultures within the bounds of a hyper-civilized neo-Victorian landscape" without really understanding what that meant, but not really giving a damn.

McNamee's glorious company of dancers obviously trust their leader with complete abandon and the commitment shows, especially from the remarkably agile Scott Hislop, as well as unusually paired-off dancers Mecca Andrews and Lisa A. Lock, who provide a striking visual contrast dancing together. The fascinatingly strident, angular movements created by McNamee aren't quite like anything seen before, offering a hypnotic statement about resistance and acceptance, of the physical, sexual, and emotional give and take that is the essence of the human relationship. Led by the original music of cellist Anna Clyne and the understated urban techno-sexual musings of composer Mount Sims, among other collaborators, watching *Victorious* made me wonder what it was like for Sergei Diaghilev when his muse Nijinsky was booed off the stage in the early part of the last century. McNamee and her company could be in for that kind of greatness—and a bit of that kind of misunderstanding, too. For information, call (323) 882-6912.