THEATER: Shipping Dock's "Exits and Entrances"

By Eric Rezsnyak on May. 8th, 2007

There's a passage in Athol Fugard's "Exits and Entrances" in which Andre Huguenet explains that at their best, actors strive to dream while on stage, to fully become another person. But the catch is that the audience must give them permission to dream (I'm paraphrasing here). Based on the performance I saw at Shipping Dock Theatre last weekend, permission granted.

"Exits" is set in South Africa in two different years, 1961 and 1956. The play features only two characters, Huguenet (played at Shipping Dock by Roger Gans) and Fugard's autobiographical Playwright (played by Bobby Maville), who recounts two critical meetings he had with the Afrikaaner stage actor who greatly influenced his life. The story is simple, but its themes are complex; it uses the theater as metaphor for life in general; showcases the eternal struggle of youthful optimism and the older, jaded pro; and weaves in some of the South African political issues that are the hallmark of all of Fugard's works.

Using the stage as a framework for life lessons is hardly new. But Obie- and Tony-winning Fugard is talented enough to realize this, and his sharp writing keeps the play from descending into an endless string of clichés. His dramatic interpretation of Huguenet is a canvas on which he paints an easily recognizable portrait - the ambitious, talented artist who never quite makes it - but one filled with interesting new wrinkles. If Huguenet the man was half as interesting as Huguenet the character, he was a fascinating human being indeed.

Playwright, on the hand, is a bit of a cipher. When the play begins, he has just learned of Huguenet's death from a tiny newspaper obit; the cause of death, he comments, is noticeably absent. He suspects he knows exactly what happened, and his role quickly becomes that of the scene-setter, as he takes the audience back to his initial meeting with the actor a few years ago. At that point he worked with Huguenet as co-star and backstage assistant during a production of "Oedipus Rex." Fugard gets the most out of the actor-playing-an-actor set-up by having a boastful but charming Huguenet running lines with Playwright, which in turn leads to him reciting some of Sophocles' most powerful passages. These speeches about destiny, about power, about pride are essential in understanding Huguenet specifically, but people in general.

The play then flashes forward a few years as Playwright introduces his second and final meeting with Huguenet, when he goes backstage to visit him after watching
Huguenet in a production of Bridget Boland's "The Prisoner." Both men have changed considerably. The formerly passive, shy Playwright is ascending as a writer, and after watching the injustices of apartheid first-hand, he has resolved to tell the stories of the persecuted and ignored through his work. Meanwhile, Huguenet's star has dimmed; poverty has forced him to take a humiliating job as a movie theater manager, and he now believes that his life's work won't amount to very much. The two men argue - politely - the merits of striving to dream and how creativity can change the world, and Fugard once again smartly has Huguenet recite sections of Boland's "Prisoner" to convey more lessons learned about humility, about accepting personal faults, etc.

The play is powerful, but it would fall to pieces without the right actor in the Huguenet role. Roger Gans does a heck of a job, his booming baritone commanding all the attention that an admitted ham like Huguenet would require. He keeps the banter with Playwright light and friendly, but always with a challenging, paternalistic edge. When he recites sections from "Oedipus," "Prisoner," and even "Hamlet," he meets the tricky challenges of an actor playing an actor. There's enough self-consciousness there to see that the character is playing at being someone else, but he delivers each speech so believably, it's as though he wrote the words himself.

Maville's character gets more interesting in the second flashback, as his politics give him a bit of fire in the belly and he challenges Huguenet's dismissive attitude. Still, he's too soft-spoken to ever seem like the actor's equal, although that may be an intentional dramatic choice. Maville also employs an accent (Gans does not, or does so very lightly) - which makes sense, given the play's South African setting and occasional use of Afrikaaner slang - but it's unlike any South African accent I've ever heard. Still, he delivers a sensitive performance and believably conveys the sentimentality of the play.