Theater review: 'Exits and Entrances'

Marcia Morphy

(May 10, 2007) — Writers are encouraged to write about what they know and love, and in the case of South African playwright Athol Fugard, his passion revolved around the theater. His muse? Actor Andre Huguenet, better known as the "Olivier of South Africa."

Perhaps the gist of Fugard's 75-minute autobiography is an epiphany for the writer, but *Exits and Entrances* seems more like quicksilver *Arrivals and Departures* for the audience. And although Shipping Dock's production is a bold and solid effort on the part of director Marcy L. Gamzon and actors Roger Gans as Huguenet (the meatier role) and Bobby Maville as Fugard (The Playwright), the storyline is entirely too hard to follow as it zigzags between time zones (1956 and 1961), snippets of soliloquies from Hamlet to Oedipus, and the bleak, harsh truths shared between an aspiring playwright and an aging actor bruised by life.

Dramatic encounters of the real kind take place between Maville, who is hired to play a small role in *Oedipus Rex* and act as assistant to the star, and Gans, who regales the playwright with tales of his illustrious theatrical career.

The second scene takes place a few months before the actor's untimely death, when the playwright revisits the admittedly gay actor in his dressing room to compliment him on a performance.

Witnessing Gans as he seamlessly moves from acting as the man vs. acting as the actor is a real treat, and his metamorphosis — from a pompous and overbearing man who is possessed by his craft, to a fading star who shrinks in stature right before our eyes — is riveting. And Maville is equally adept as an engaging writer on the cusp of establishing his notoriety, yet balanced and in tune with his heartfelt displays for his old friend and mentor.

The action takes place against a sparsely adorned "backstage" set with a dressing table and a wardrobe closet, where Gans sheds his undergarments and ceremoniously adorns himself with robes — metaphorically stripping himself of artifice before resigning himself to it.

Although *Exits and Entrances* can easily be regarded as a wordsmith's dream, it also makes me wonder. Is placing oneself so completely into one's work the ultimate example of involved creativity, or is it simple hubris?

Perhaps the answer is when Gans proclaims, before his final bow, "The awful
truth is that the audience has to give you permission to dream." At that point I wanted to give him what he asked for and go to sleep.

Freelancer Marcia Morphy writes about theater.