South African Playwright Fugard Visits IU Bloomington

In 1999, Indiana University’s Lilly Library of rare books and manuscripts announced the acquisition of a major literary collection, the papers of internationally renowned South African playwright, Athol Fugard (see article in International Programs Newsletter, October 1999), comprising his drafts, typescripts, production notes, and other papers. Albert Wertheim, IU professor of English, comparative literature, and theatre and drama and a Fugard scholar, ranks him as among the “five most important English language playwrights alive today.”

Last fall, the playwright and the scholar joined together to present the Bloomington community with a rare occasion to see them both in action. The university invited Fugard in September as a Class of 1963 Wells Professor, to coincide with the publication of Wertheim’s book The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World (Indiana University Press, 2000). Fugard spent two weeks on campus and participated in two public presentations that took place at the University Theatre. The first event was a public reading from a selection of his works. The second, “In Conversation with Albert Wertheim,” was a wide-ranging discussion of his life and works.

In response to leading questions posed by Wertheim, Fugard spoke of his Anglo-Irish-Afrikaaner childhood, his early and continuing fascination with the written and spoken word and its capacity to hide and to reveal, the personal experiences that led to his awareness of the human and social injustices of apartheid, and how he chose the theatre as the most pragmatic, immediate form of art to express his struggles against the political system.

Fugard often directs and acts in his own plays, reflecting, as Wertheim says in his book, a “sophisticated understanding of the connections between stage action and political action, between roles assumed in the theatre and those assumed in life.”

In the early years, Fugard struggled to get his plays produced, mostly in black township theatre groups. As a director, he dared to feature racially mixed casts, sometimes playing the role of a black South African himself. During “the dark days of apartheid, he was one of the lone voices that got an international audience,” says South African Murray McGibbon, who teaches in IU’s theatre and drama department.

During his visit, Fugard also taught master classes to theatre and drama students, lectured in Wertheim’s literature class focusing on his plays, and taped an hour-long conversation with theatre professor Bruce Burgun. An exhibit of his papers was also on view at the Lilly Library through mid-October. Co-sponsors of his visit were African Studies Program, Department of English, Department of Theatre and Drama, IU Class of 1963, IU Foundation, IU Libraries, Honors College, Theatre Circle, Well House Society, and the Wells Scholar Program.

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Hear Fugard and Burgun’s conversation: www.homepages.indiana.edu