

British Theatre Guide

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The Train Driver

Athol Fugard
Hampstead Theatre
(2010)

Hampstead Theatre has really got back on track with this deeply symbolic anatomisation of post-apartheid South Africa.

On the surface, *The Train Driver* is a simple story about two men, one Black and one White, who meet at a Godforsaken cemetery in the African veldt. Just beneath lie all kinds of ghosts both real and metaphorical and, by the end, they come back to haunt not just these two men but all of us.

Afrikaner Roelf Visagie was an ordinary bloke, the eponymous Train Driver, until one day a nameless Black woman carrying a baby stood on the line between the hauntingly named Perseverance and Dispatch. Inevitably, mother and child were "pulverised", just like their people over so many years.

Poor Roelf has been haunted ever since and is seeking closure having deserted his nuclear family in an attempt to find and identify the woman or at least her remains.

In a graveyard that looks like a theatre designer's vision of a Beckettian post-apocalyptic wilderness, he comes across Andile (or Simon) Hanabe, the man charged with burying the nameless dead. For the 80 minutes of the play, this almost mythic character leads Roelf towards the catharsis that he so desperately desires.

The two men with such different backgrounds gradually begin to bond and, as they do so, Roelf discovers his own brand of personal truth and reconciliation, which eventually leads to a closure, though not of the type that he was expecting.

Athol Fugard, who directs his own play on Saul Radomsky's entirely realistic set which stretches its rocky waste out into the audience, is blessed with fine performances from both Sean Taylor and Owen Sejake. The former is gently manic but gradually calms down under the benign influence of the seemingly ignorant but folk-wise local gravedigger.

For a play in which two men stand around talking for most of the duration, *The Train Driver* has incredible hidden depths. Each of these individuals represents a whole race and as such, bears a heavy burden.

The fact that their experiences subtly mirror those of the new South Africa in which, following the pulverisation of the Black community for so long, the Whites now find themselves at a loss and constantly under threat, is beautifully conceived and brought to the stage.

Athol Fugard, one of the great heroes of contemporary South Africa, here proves that he still has the ability to write deeply moving and incredibly important works and we should be grateful to Edward Hall for bringing *The Train Driver* to London.

Playing until 4 December

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)