

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Wirework

Daleen Kruger (translated by Idil Sheard)

Voice Business

Tristan Bates Theatre

3–7 July 2018

This is a play, written in Afrikaans and originally titled *Draadwerk*, that won the Nightly Prize in 2009 about Helen Martins, a former actress and teacher who in the 1960s began surrounding her home in Nieu-Bethesda with sculptures made of chicken wire and concrete.

There are more than 300 figures of people and animals in the yard of the Owl House, which was declared a provisional monument in 1989 and was opened as a museum in 1992.

In 1964, she began paying a local goatherd, Koos Malgas, to help her, believing he had a natural talent for sculpture. *Wirework* is a two-hander about their relationship and about creation, divine and artistic.

This isn't a documentary drama; director Leigh Toney and scenographer Declan Randall have kept a good balance between the naturalistic and the imaginative, especially in the setting which combines real grass, a wire-screened veranda and a wheelbarrow and spade for cement-mixing with a background of crumpled shiny metal cut through with a chevron that reveals colour and on which lights and projections suggest atmosphere, landscape and a sky full of sculpture.

Kurt Kansley begins things as Koos, talking about creation: both how he starts off making forms in chicken wire and about God the Maker. How He created light and called it day, then saw his house was untidy and started to make things—creatures, people especially, people to talk to, for the Lord likes to talk.

Then we meet Elaine Wallace's Helen Martins. Not liking the dark, she wants to cover the walls of her home with glittering glass and approving an owl she has asked Koos to make plans to fill the yard with sculptures. She seems a little awkward at first, sentences fragmented: Helen doesn't really like people. She certainly doesn't seem too keen on a local pastor who has given her a radio to listen to church services. (Athol Fugard wrote a play partly about that relationship: *The Road to Mecca*.) But she does like Koos and sees talent in him, produces postcards to inspire him. "You look at the picture for a long time," she says, "then you think with your hands."

This isn't a play based on action. It gently explores the relationship between that eccentric aging lady, gradually going blind, and the caring, illiterate craftsman. It is more an homage to her memory and her creation than a drama, to the strange world—she put up a sign saying "My World"—that she left behind her with its camels and gateways, Christ and the Magi, its worshippers facing to Mecca, its owls and the strange cock-headed figure representing her father, standing with his trousers held open—just one of the hints about her life that are never laboured.

This British première works because the performers themselves believe in it and play it with sincerity.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)