

Victory

The Fountain Theatre, Los Angeles
(323) 663-1525



Athol Fugard's "superior, unmissable" new play succeeds on every level, said Bob Verini in *Variety*. The South African playwright's taut, 60-minute one-act "works first of all as a cat-and-mouse, intruder-in-the-house thriller." Lionel, a bookish white teacher, has his house broken into by Vicky and Freddie, a young black couple. Lovensky Jean-Baptiste's Freddie, "his mood swinging from furious glee to bewilderment when events outrun his planning," rashly takes the teacher hostage. Soon Lionel discovers that Vicky is, in fact, the daughter of his former housekeeper. This revelation makes *Victory* a wrenching tale of betrayal. But this wouldn't be a Fugard play if there weren't "an element of political allegory as well." Though South Africa's formal system of apartheid was dismantled two decades ago, Fugard makes clear that the country's racial and political divides are as deep as ever.

As Lionel, "Morlan Higgins conjures a world of pain," said Charlotte Stoudt in the *Los Angeles Times*. The old, disillusioned liberal can hardly blame the desperate criminals in his home, but he certainly cannot hide his disappointment that they should behave so crudely. "This superb performer finds more power in listening than most actors would with a mountain of dialogue." Like the rest of Stephen Sachs' spare production, he shows how to do a lot with a little. Unfortunately, Fugard's dialogue is too often heavy-handed. "The playwright can't resist telling us how their violent encounter symbolizes his country's crisis."



Jean-Baptiste, Higgins: South Africa in microcosm

Yet there are moments of great subtlety, said Steven Leigh Morris in the *LA Weekly*. In one scene, Lionel takes a gun he drew to protect himself and simply hands it over to his captors. "The transfer of weapon from white man to black, given both reluctantly and freely," quietly encapsulates South Africa's post-apartheid transfer of power. Fugard "remains a storyteller first and a moralist second," however, and *Victory* is most memorable for its character studies. Through Lionel, he explores how those who work to achieve social progress suffer when society doesn't live up to its end of the bargain. Through Freddie, "Fugard is making a severe dramatic inquiry into the unfettered rage that is the consequence" of promises left unfulfilled.

The week's other openings**New York****Hunting and Gathering**

59E59 Theaters, (212) 279-4200

"Urban dating as anthropology has been presented by North American playwrights for decades," said Brendan Lemon in the *Financial Times*. In her comedy about single New Yorkers, Brooke Berman livens things up with various subplots regarding real estate transactions. But ultimately it just "feels like a wispily literate version of *Friends*."

Two Thousand Years

Acorn Theatre, (212) 279-4200

Mike Leigh, best known as a film director, introduces a particularly cantankerous Jewish family in his new play, said Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times*. Their arguments about one son's decision to embrace Orthodoxy are occasionally hilarious. But "the loose, languid structure that works so well in his movies can feel sluggish onstage."

San Francisco**Curvy Widow**

Post Street Theatre, (415) 771-6900

See this one-woman play about the "mating games of the postmenopausal set" for Cybill Shepherd's lively performance, said Karen D'Souza in the *San Jose Mercury News*. Bobby Goldman's script isn't as funny as the playwright thinks, and her play is "at its best when we get to bask in Shepherd's gutsier-than-thou personal charisma."

Talking Pictures

Goodman Theatre, Chicago

(312) 443-3800



Playwright Horton Foote has a reputation for being a bit "old-fashioned," said Chris Jones in the *Chicago Tribune*. But this 1987 work remains surprisingly relevant. Set in the fictional town of Harrison, Texas, just prior to the Depression, *Talking Pictures* tells the story of Myra, a recently divorced pianist who ekes out a living providing music for the town's silent-movie theater. When the arrival of the "talkies" threatens Myra's meager livelihood, she and her teenage son, Pete, become boarders in the home of the Jacksons, a local family with troubles of their own. One of Foote's major themes is how the residents of Harrison are "woefully slow to adapt" to modern life. But the sudden technological and economic changes these struggling characters face "aren't much different than those that swirl around us now," and Foote wryly suggests we're quite as clueless.

Beneath the small-town, small-problem facade of Foote's work lies a close-to-the-bone realism, said Hedy Weiss in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Almost all of Foote's



McKnight: Playing the changes

plays are set in Harrison—a double for his hometown of Wharton. Now 92, he's devoted himself to chronicling life in an insular Texas hamlet, and the result is a deep-rooted knowledge of his characters' motivations. Jenny McKnight anchors this production as Myra, whose "serene surface is in beautiful tension with her volcanic emotions." Bubba Weiler makes a delightfully hyperactive Pete, and an ensemble cast embodies the complicated Jackson clan. Under Henry Wishcamper's direction, their everyday adventures play out in a "charming, semi-farcal but ultimately bittersweet" way. Certain playwrights know how to perfectly capture family relationships that encapsulate a particular milieu. "The Russians have Anton Chekhov. The Irish have Brian Friel. And we Americans have Horton Foote."

Stars reflect the overall quality of reviews and our own independent assessment (4 stars=don't miss; 3 stars=worth seeing; 2 stars=not terrible; 1 star=don't bother)