**Nieu Bethesda, Athol Fugard, the Struggle and ……….the Owl House**

Athol Fugard has been called “the greatest active living playwright in the English speaking world” by critics and scholars. The 2012 film on Fugard’s life broadcast on Sky Arts in America. claimed that Fugard, along with Shakespeare , is the most performed playwright in the world.

The title of a study of Athol Fugard by Marianne McDonald, professor in theatre and classics at the University of California, is called *The Craft of Athol Fugard: Space, Time, and Silence*. In the Karoo, and in Nieu Bethesda, Fugard has found these “essential elements of all writing and especially of staged plays”.(MM)

Nieu Bethesda has given Fugard something and in return Fugard has given Nieu Bethesda its new life. For about 50 years the village grew after it had been founded in 1878, --- the school had over 200 children --- and then went into a decline till Athol Fugard wrote *The Road to Mecca* which premiered in 1984 in America and in London’s National Theatre. Theatre-goers started to look for the Owl House and in 1991 the first touristy place, The Village Inn restaurant, opened its doors. Other eating places and guest houses followed soon and Nieu Bethesda was revived.

In his plays Fugard gave South Africa and the world an insight into the lives of many different people of South Africa at a time when the government made laws that prohibited blacks and whites actors to appear on the stage at the same time, and many other apartheid-laws that had devastating effects on the lives of many South Africans. Fugard had his passport confiscated in 1967 after the BBC2 Broadcast of *The Blood Knot*, but has always objected to being called a “struggle writer”. John Corry writes in a review of The Blood Knot in the *New York Times* in 1980: “It is ……….always more concerned with people than with politics”

Fugard himself considers himself an Eastern-Cape writer, ‘n “streekskrywer” rather than a “struggle writer”. He has strong views about people who are hailed as writers simply because they have a message. There is no doubt however, that his plays like *Nongogo (1959), The Blood Knot, (*1961), *Boesman and Lena (*1969), *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972), *Master Harold …. and the Boys* (1982) and others have brought the effects of apartheid on a society, to the attention of many who might have remained oblivious of the situation. In an interview that Andre Brink had with Fugard in *Leadership* magazine (April 1990) Brink quoted the “influential American theatre critic” Robert Brustein who asserted that “Athol Fugard may become the first playwright in history to be a candidate for canonisation”.

Fugard wrote in one of his early *Notebooks* “We are here a short time and at the end of that short time one of the few thing we can have is the dignity that comes from courage and truth.”

This is what is needed in this undignified struggle between the different parties about the preservation of the Owl House.