



The Times-Picayune

BIG 'VALLEY'

New storefront theater debuts with a remarkable 'Valley Song'

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By David Cuthbert

Theater writer/The Times-Picayune

A remarkable experience awaits you in a new Central City storefront theater. Veteran theater-goers may be reminded of the glory days of Dashiki and Free Southern theaters, when committed artists working in modest surroundings created productions that are today the stuff of local legend.

"Valley Song" is Athol Fugard's 1995 play set in post-apartheid South Africa, where things haven't changed that much for poor, rural people of color.

Abraam "Buks" Jonkers -- "Oupa" to his granddaughter -- is a 75-year-old farmer who has worked the same few acres of land all his life, even though they don't belong to him. The land, to him, is a thing of ever-renewable miracles. "It's like a woman," he says. "You treat it right, it feeds you."

His granddaughter Veronica sees it another way. "It gives us food," she says, "but it takes our lives."

Veronica dreams of moving to Johannesburg and beginning the singing career she has visualized in detail for herself. Already she composes her own songs and sings them in the streets for money. Her grandfather won't hear of her going to the city and having it destroy her as it did her mother.

Further cautionary words come from a white writer who is buying the land her grandfather farms. He advises her to scale back her dreams to something more practical.

"There is no use of a little dream," she reasons. "It has to be big and special. Otherwise you're not dreaming properly."

Everything Oupa ever wanted is, or was, there in the valley. Everything Veronica wants lies beyond it. The writer wants to return to a simpler way of life. He has achieved what Veronica wants and now yearns for the contentment her grandfather has.

This very direct, quasi-poetic drama is more focused than most Fugard plays. It is told in a kind of story theater format, where the writer narrates and then interacts with the other two characters. And the white writer and the mixed-race grandfather are played by the same actor -- Fugard himself in the original productions of the play.

Here, the parts are played with compelling simplicity by Bert Pigg, who changes only his accent, tone of voice and posture to delineate the two roles. Pigg proves a spellbinding storyteller and

quietly persuasive performer in both parts, suddenly unleashing great power as the grandfather angrily rejects Veronica's dream. Nothing you may have seen Pigg do elsewhere will prepare you for this exceptional, self-effacing, non-traditional turn.

As Veronica, the exquisite Fahnlohnée Harris is utterly captivating, and when her ebullient high spirits are crushed, she is mutely, eloquently moving. Her a cappella singing has such warmth and wonder, you feel the audience would wrap its arms around her if it could.

Jimmy Walker's direction -- like the play and players -- is unaffected and nuanced. He draws the audience in with entrances and exits down the center aisle and the playing of bits directly to individual audience members. Michelle Levine's cyclorama is eye-pleasing and effective.

The 75-seat Neighborhood Gallery Theatre is part of a complex run by Sandra Berry and Joshua Walker that includes an art gallery and thrift shop. A communal garden is at one end of the block and several blocks away are the Ashe Cultural Center and Barristers Gallery, which shares its space with Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center. There is new life on this blighted, once-thriving thoroughfare.

And "Valley Song" provides the ideal opportunity to acquaint yourself with what's happening there. It is one of Oupa's small miracles.

VALLEY SONG

What: Athol Fugard's play, directed by Jimmy Walker.

Where: Neighborhood Gallery Theater, 1410 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd.

When: Sun-Mon-Wed at 8, through Feb. 20.

Tickets: \$10. Call 524-8800.

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