

**Michael Billington** discovers revolution on the syllabus at the Lyttelton

## The word versus the fist

**I**MPORTED to the Lyttelton from the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!* is an engrossing play about the importance of education in a changing South Africa. Fugard writes from a liberal-humanist standpoint. But what is fascinating is that his sentiments coincide almost exactly with those of Nelson Mandela who not so long ago told students to throw their weapons into the sea and go back to school.

Set in a small Eastern Cape town in 1984, Fugard's play starts with an inter-school debate about sexual equality. Thami, a black boy, confronts Isabel, a pharmacist's white daughter, under the watchful eye of Mr M, a Confucian teacher. An old-fashioned idealist, Mr M decides to turn the debating opponents into allies and enter them jointly in an English Literature quiz at the Grahamstown Schools Festival. But the plan is scuppered both by Thami's increasing political militancy and by the advent of the schools boycott. The pupil turns against his master who persists in keeping the school open during the strikes and demonstrations.

Fugard's play itself takes the form of a debate with argument and counter-argument emerging from the three representative characters. Mr M stands for traditional political optimism and a belief in the sacredness of language. Thami repre-

sents the impatient black young who want freedom now. And Isabel symbolises the dawning social conscience of privileged young whites determined to work for a just society.

What Fugard has to say is of vital importance but there are times when you can hear the sound of dice being loaded. At one point Mr M confronts Thami with a dictionary in one hand and a stone in the other and asks him to weigh up the power of one against the impotence of the other. It's a good theatrical image but it begs the whole question of how one is to change an educational system which was designed to prevent blacks being educated. Fugard also writes as if a knowledge of Eng Lit culture were the surest means to political advancement: it is one way but I saw for myself in South Africa this year young blacks who had achieved self-respect through exploration of their own folk-culture, music and dance.

But it is a sign of the quality of Fugard's play that it triggers off debates inside one's own head. It also contains scenes of fine irony such as that in which Thami and Isabel compete in their knowledge of the Romantic poets and he wipes the floor with her on Byron, the supreme apostle of political freedom: One of Fugard's virtues is that he doesn't just theorise about the magical excitement of language: he demonstrates it.



Rapulana Seiphemo as Thami

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His own production, staged on a simple wooden platform, also contains three wonderfully impassioned performances. John Kani as Mr M is not simply a Karoo Mr Chips but a baggy-trousered philanthropist and ardent missionary who argues the case for a liberal education with all banners flying: the actor's own spirit informs everything he says. Lisa Fugard as Isabel also conveys excellently the character's transformation from girlish, hockey-sticks enthusiasm to chastened maturity. And, although he ultimately has the worst of the argument, Rapulana Seiphemo

as Thami earned the loudest applause at the Lyttelton for his ringing declaration of revolutionary fervour. As a dramatist, Fugard is not afraid of didacticism; but at least he practises what he preaches and here puts the case for the centrality of a liberal education with impassioned, gosselling eloquence.

● *My Children! My Africa!* is at the Lyttelton until September 15 and then tours to Hackney Empire, Nottingham Playhouse, Warwick Arts Centre, Wolverhampton Grand and Cambridge Arts Centre.

## Billington on My Children!

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