

**ATHOL FUGARD'S LUMINOUS
THE ROAD TO MECCA
PRESENTED AT SAN FRANCISCO'S Z BELOW**

Directed by Timothy Near
Featuring Victor Talmadge, Wendy vanden Heuvel, Kodi Jackman
June 4 - 30, 2023 (opening night: June 8)

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (26 April 2023) — **Athol Fugard's** incandescent and thought-provoking *The Road to Mecca* comes to San Francisco's **Z Below**, presented by Weathervane Productions. Obie Award winner **Timothy Near** will direct this production, reuniting with Broadway actor **Victor Talmadge** (David Mamet's *November, The King & I, The Lion King*) and award-winning actor and producer **Wendy vanden Heuvel** (Signature Theatre, Guthrie Theater, Magic Theatre). The powerhouse trio collaborated on a hit run of Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* at Z Below in 2018, which won a San Francisco Bay Area Critics Award for Best Entire Production and received the *San Francisco Chronicle's* highest rating. They will be joined by exciting regional actress **Kodi Jackman** for this production. *The Road to Mecca* will be presented **June 4-30, 2023** (press opening: June 8) at Z Below, 470 Florida Street, San Francisco. For tickets (\$25) and more information the public may visit zspace.org/mecca.

Set in a small South African town, *The Road to Mecca* follows eccentric aging widow Miss Helen (based on artist Helen Martins), who fills her house and overgrown garden with life-sized sculptures and statues that represent a fantasy pilgrimage to Mecca. Spurned by neighbors who think her crazy, the artist is compelled to keep at her solitary work, which not only transforms her world into a magical paradise, but creates a testament to artistic freedom in the midst of repression and political turbulence. A struggle ensues as a young schoolteacher advocates for the aging artist, while a conservative pastor friend insists that Miss Helen is declining and for her own sake should be moved away from her beloved refuge.

The Road to Mecca was initially presented Off-Broadway where it won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and was adapted into a film starring Fugard alongside Yvonne Bryceland, and Kathy Bates. Its Broadway premiere in 2011 was lauded as a "powerful" (*The New York Times*) work that

“glows with a rare luminosity and intensity...eloquent and transforming” (*The Christian Science Monitor*).

Director Near has assembled an all-star cast to bring Fugard’s work to life. Award-winning producer and actor **Wendy vanden Heuvel** stars as Miss Helen, the eccentric artist. Once a member of Jerzy Grotowski’s Objective Drama Project, vanden Heuvel has performed at regional theatres across the country. Her film credits include producing the documentary *The Lake Lucille Project: I am a Seagull* and appearing in the films *Burn Country*, *Under the Silver Lake*, *Frank The Bastard*, and *The Undeserved*. She starred at Z Below in *A Lesson From Aloes*, which was lauded as “Absorbing. Affecting. Finely realized,” with performances described as “compelling, each a vital piece of a subtle yet shattering story.” (*San Francisco Chronicle*.)

Also lauded for his performance in *A Lesson From Aloes* at Z Below, Broadway actor and Bay Area theatre veteran **Victor Talmadge** plays pastor Marius Byleveld. Talmadge starred in the touring production of *The King & I* and the Los Angeles production of *The Lion King*, and was featured in David Mamet’s *November* on Broadway. He has performed extensively off-Broadway and at regional theatres, including American Conservatory Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, San Francisco Playhouse, California Shakespeare Theater, The Magic Theatre, Aurora Theatre Company, and Santa Cruz Shakespeare. He has worked in film and television with luminaries including Francis Ford Coppola. Talmadge also won the Nakashima Peace Prize for his play *The Gate of Heaven*, which has been performed at The U.S. Holocaust Memorial, The Old Globe Theater, Ford’s Theatre, and The Annenberg Center.

Kodi Jackman completes the cast as Elsa Barlow, a young Capetown schoolteacher who is a long-distance friend and spiritual protégé of Miss Helen. Jackman has performed with La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, Ensemble Theatre Company, Shakespeare on the Deck, Shakespeare Orange County, New Orleans Fringe Festival, and was also a member of New Orleans Shakespeare Festival’s touring company, Shakespeare on the Road. Jackman is the co-host of *Shake Shake Shake*, a podcast on classics, cocktails, and conscious casting.

The Road to Mecca features scenic design by **Erik Flatmo**, costume design by **Meg Neville**, lighting design by **Kurt Landsiman**, sound design by **Jake Rodriguez**, and set decoration by **Leah Hammond**.

Timothy Near (director) is an award-winning director and actor. She won the Obie Award for her performance in Emily Mann's *Still Life* and a Theatre Bay Area Award for her direction of Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*"...and the boys at Aurora Theatre Company. Her direction of Fugard's *A Lesson From Aloes* at Z Below was lauded by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which noted, "Near's meticulous production deftly renders Fugard's gem, orchestrating a balanced triad of nuanced performances." Near served as the Artistic Director at San Jose Repertory Theatre for 22 years, where she produced over 120 plays including 21 world premieres. Her work has been seen at the nation's leading theatres including the Public Theater, Guthrie Theater, La Jolla Playhouse, Mark Taper Forum, Goodman Theatre, Alliance Theatre, and Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Athol Fugard is an internationally-acclaimed South African playwright, director, actor, and novelist known for his politically-charged work opposing apartheid. A recipient of the Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre, *The New Yorker* called Fugard "a rare playwright, who could be a primary candidate for either the Nobel Prize in Literature or the Nobel Peace Prize." Fugard's plays have garnered Obie, New York Drama Critics' Circle, Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel and Outer Critics Circle Awards, and Fugard has also won an Outer Critics Circle Award and a Helen Hayes Award for his direction. His works *The Road to Mecca*, "*Master Harold*"...and the boys, *Blood Knot*, *A Lesson From Aloes*, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, and *The Island* have been produced on Broadway. The film adaptation of his novel *Tsotsi* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2006.

For Calendar Editors:

WHAT: **Athol Fugard's** incandescent and thought-provoking *The Road to Mecca* comes to San Francisco's **Z Below**, presented by Weathervane Productions. Obie Award winner **Timothy Near** will direct this production, reuniting with Broadway actor **Victor Talmadge** and award-winning actor and producer **Wendy vanden Heuvel**. The powerhouse trio collaborated on a hit run of Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* at Z Below in 2018, which won a San Francisco Bay Area Critics Award for Best Entire Production and received the *San Francisco Chronicle's* highest rating. They will be joined by exciting regional actress **Kodi Jackman** for this production. Set in a small South African town, *The Road to Mecca* follows eccentric aging widow Miss Helen (based on artist Helen Martins), who fills her house and overgrown garden with life-sized sculptures and statues that represent a fantasy pilgrimage to Mecca. Spurned by neighbors who think her crazy, the artist is compelled to keep at her solitary work, which not only transforms her world into a magical paradise, but creates a testament to artistic freedom in the midst of repression and political turbulence. A struggle ensues as a young schoolteacher advocates for the aging artist, while a conservative pastor friend insists that Miss Helen is declining and for her own sake should be moved away from her beloved refuge.

WHEN: Previews: Sunday, June 4 – Wednesday, June 7, 2023
Press opening: Thursday, June 8, 2023
Closing: Friday, June 30, 2023

SHOWS: 7:30pm Wed - Sat
2pm Sun

Additional performances:
6pm Sun. June 4
7:30pm Tues. June 6

WHERE: Z Below, 470 Florida Street, San Francisco

TICKETS: \$25

INFO: Tickets and information at <https://www.zspace.org/mecca>.

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PRESS: Contact Lauren Goldfarb, Carla Befera & Co.
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PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos are available: <http://cbpr.co/press/theroadtomecca>