

Wits University recently conferred on Athol Fugard, South Africa's internationally acclaimed playwright, the degree of Doctor of Literature in recognition of his achievements as a writer, for his contributions to the theatre and for his efforts to counter the "drought in the human heart". Here is an edited version of his address at the graduation ceremony.

# Trust will be 'cornerstone of the future'

**L**ike most South Africans, I have felt profoundly challenged by the dramatic developments of the past two months: challenged, among other things, to think about myself and my role as a writer in the free and open society everyone is talking about.

How would that role differ, if at all, from what it was in the brutally oppressive South Africa we are trying to break with? That thinking has involved something of a stock-taking of ideas, values, prejudices and ideals I have as a political animal.

And it involves a few questions. What do I need to keep? What should I get rid of? And, most important, what do I need that I haven't got?

A great deal has been said since that remarkable speech (by President De Klerk) in Parliament on February 2 about the climate of trust needed to usher in the brave new South Africa.

Trust is going to be the cornerstone of the future. It would be very short-sighted of us to think that external political devices evolved or dismantled at the negotiating table will by themselves be enough to ensure a just and decent society.

Namibia's marvellous constitution, for example, will become the basis of a truly democratic society only if the ideals are matched by a deep moral commitment on the part of its citizens.

I have always believed that when the time came I would be able to make that trusting commitment without too much trouble or effort. I was wrong.

To put it bluntly, I am going to have to do a lot of hard work on myself in order to come up with the degree of trust – with any degree of trust – asked for.

That stock-taking I referred to has been a very sobering experience. It has ended with me realising that after 40 years of trying to survive the pressures of an apartheid

society, I have brainwashed myself into a set of hard and unyielding political attitudes.

They are characterised by a deep scepticism and downright distrust of anything coming from the government.

One of the most subtle but at the same time devastating assaults on the quality of our lives has been the climate of suspicion created by the government – suspicion not only of the government and its agents but in our own personal relationships.

I will never forget how that whispered and hated word "informer" became part of my daily life down in the Eastern Cape. Judging from the ongoing revelations of the Harms Commission and the reports about the Johannesburg City Council's own network of informers, I am not talking about

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past history.

Distrust, deception and plain, no-frills dishonesty – those are now the real elements of the traditional way of life apparently kept very much alive by a government now asking for my trust.

There was a report in a radio news bulletin on Monday evening of an appeal by a cabinet minister asking, and I quote, "for South Africans to change their attitudes and have respect for each other's lives and goals".

The next day's headlines reported eight people shot dead in a clash between police and protest marchers at Sebokeng. It is not easy for me to generate trust in the face of these contradictions.

And, if that is the case with me, what

must it be like for one of those protest marchers who left a friend or relative dead on the ground when they fled the police fire?

In a recent television broadcast, another cabinet minister said the time had come to forget the past. Full stop. That was it.

The ease with which he said it left me speechless. It reflected a total insensitivity to, and a total lack of awareness of the damage done, the waste of human lives, during decades of National Party rule.

Instead of disarming me, it, in fact, feeds and deepens the distrust with which I now habitually examine anything coming from a government source.

It strengthens my suspicion that the reform initiative does not represent a change of heart asked of me but is rather a last-

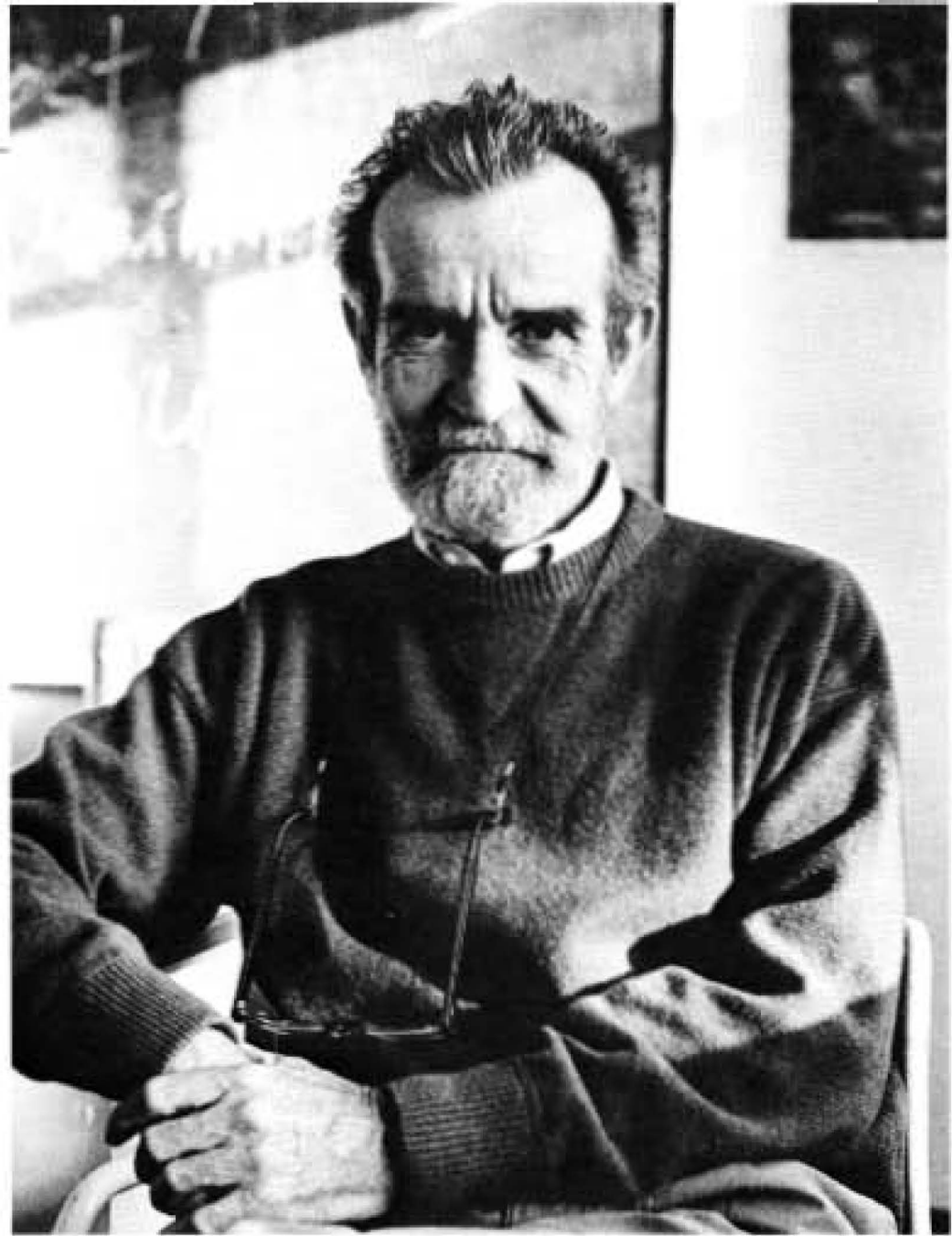
ditch political manoeuvre to stave off the loss of white privilege and political power.

There are most likely many other white South Africans who feel the way I do and almost certainly millions of black South Africans. This is a tragic state of affairs because unless the trust in the reform initiative is forthcoming, this society is headed for chaos.

As is already obvious, the political temperature of South Africa is at boiling point. The onus is on the government to bring down that temperature. The only way to do so is to stop talking about dismantling apartheid and to do it.

The euphoria that followed February 2 has worn off.

(With acknowledgement to *The Star*)



Athol Fugard

picture: RUPHIN COUDYZER