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By PATRICIA HANDLEY

Playwright Reza de Wet has crafted magical tales with an earthy humour and archetypal characters that seem quite simple on the surface. Yet her plays resound deeply with not only mystery but also a complexity of meanings and associations that has everything to do with the power of the imagination.

Reza de Wet has never lived in the *platteland* or on a farm, nor even owned a *klein hoewe*. Yet a peculiarly rural, Afrikaner milieu of the past pervades the playwright's work with qualities of earthiness, humour, simplicity and child-like wonder.

It has been an exciting milieu to work in, she says, "because being so specific, you can be more universal". Marthinus Basson, who has directed De Wet's last three plays for CAPAB and knows them more deeply than most, would probably agree. What he describes as a "peculiar old-fashioned quality", a harking back to the past, gives De Wet's plays a warmth. "It is also quite an important tactical move since it makes the audience feel safe. They feel they know this," he says.

He believes her work is firmly rooted in a kind of "volksteater". "And working from a safe command, one can deal with very challenging subjects." Basson is also aware of the way in which De Wet's language plays "magnificently" with intuitive Afrikaans phrases, and sayings everyone knows "almost instinctively", just as her titles – *Mis*, *Drif* – convey myriad meanings and associations.

*Drif* concluded the cycle of plays – all set in the Orange Free State in about 1930 – that De Wet published in 1993 as *Trits: Mis-Mirakel-Drif*. A prolific writer and an important contemporary Afrikaans playwright, De Wet continues to win awards for her work. Yet it would be a mistake to presume that it has all been in the same mould.

Her *Vrystaat-trilogie*, published in 1991, included *Diepe Grond*, with its deep psychological workings, *Op Dees Aarde*, which is most closely echoed in the style of the *Trits* plays, and a historical drama, *Nag, Generaal*. De Wet's next plays were in English – *In a Different Light* and *Worm in the Bud* – and she is completing her first novel, *Die Mans van Stil Mathilde*. De Wet likes the central character very much. "She delights me. And she never speaks – she is not mute; it just comes about that she never needs to speak."

The novel has elements of the comic, the grotesque and the magical, and is "quite erotic". It has surprised De Wet more than anything else she has written, but one could be forgiven for seeing many parallels with her plays. If there is something of the magical, the mysterious, and an apparent con-

Portrait by Alexandra Murphy

a pond reflecting the sky