

Whipping Man, Blood Knot: race to the top

A Fugard classic and a post-Civil War drama tell a thorny tale in black & white

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Don Kenneth Mason, Ben Newman in “Blood Knot.” Photo: Jamie Bosworth

“White people are always like, ‘Come on! It wasn’t us!’ Like they want black people to forget everything. Like every year, white people add 100 years to how long ago slavery was. I’ve heard educated white people say, ‘Slavery was 400 years ago!’ No, it really wasn’t. It was 140 years ago. That’s two 70-year-old ladies living and dying back to back.”

Today a friend passed along that quote from the comedian Louis C.K., and the timing was copacetic: I’d spent the previous two evenings at the openings of Matthew Lopez’s “The Whipping Man” at Portland Center Stage and Athol Fugard’s “Blood Knot” at Profile Theatre. Talk about a soaking in the tricky pools of time! Both plays simmer their audiences in the boiling pot of a past that’s all too recent, and both deal with race as a social invention – we are “white” or “black” partly because we think we are – and also as a blood kinship. It’s tough to view these two plays without seriously disputing the popular notion that we’re living in a postracial society. Without getting too high on a soapbox, both delve into how intensely personal and fiendishly slippery racial attitudes continue to be: they can still jump out and shock us from behind almost any corner.

“The Whipping Man” raises fascinating questions and creates some sharp dramatic conflicts. But Fugard is one of the theater’s modern masters, and “Blood Knot” is a genuine contemporary masterpiece, a gorgeous literary accomplishment with huge social implications. It has the intensity of a frontline battlefield report: Fugard, a white South African, wrote it in 1961, when staging such a play was in full and open defiance of his country’s apartheid laws, and when the civil rights movement was starting to kick up a bone-rattling ruckus in the United States. Fugard (who’s lived in San Diego for many years) plays well in the U.S. not just because he’s a terrific playwright but also because the racial histories of the two countries mirror each other, imperfectly yet revealingly.

A good production of a good Fugard play makes me squirm. Not out of guilt or dislike, but in a very personal way: Fugard makes me like his characters, and then I get antsy as I watch them make boneheaded (though sometimes admirably boneheaded) decisions. No! I think. Don't do that. It's trouble! Can't you see? The characters make me itchy and impatient and fill me with dread, and stranger still, they make me like it like that. In this and pretty much every other way Profile's "Blood Knot" is very good Fugard, indeed – brilliant Fugard, I'm tempted to say. It's scary, funny, and sometimes shockingly raw, and director Kevin Jones navigates its swiftly shifting currents expertly. The two stars, Don Kenneth Mason as dark-skinned Zach and Ben Newman as his light-skinned brother Morris, seem ideally matched: Morris soft and insinuating, a "handler" of things; Mason hard and toughened, a doer. The way these two skillful actors pay deep attention to each other, even when their characters are ignoring each other, is really what acting's all about. Especially in Profile's intimate quarters, which the company can hope to match next season when it moves its digs to Artists Rep, "Blood Knot" is at once an intensely personal story and a very big cultural metaphor, and part of its thrill is to follow along as it traverses the borderlands between.

People don't like to talk about shades of darkness, but the issue's real, and in a way, President Obama exemplifies it. For a lot of Americans he's too black simply by being black at all. For others he looks and acts too "white" to be legitimately "black." It's not just about blood, it's about degrees of blood, and attitudes, and staking a claim in one camp or the other. As Fugard's title suggests, it's all knotted up: white or black, to a greater or lesser degree, we're related biologically and culturally, and we can love it or hate it, but here we are, in the same bed, and now what are we going to do about it?

Morris is so light-skinned that he can pass for white (Fugard himself played him, opposite Zakes Mokae, in the original South African production, and the two repeated their roles years later on Broadway) and he's the brother who has plans: they'll save their money, get away, become farmers in a remote part of the country. Almost unconsciously, he manages Zach's life, and almost unconsciously, if sometimes reluctantly, Zach lets him. Eventually he manages Zach into a potentially disastrous mistake: hoping to satisfy Zach's itch for a woman, Morris steers him toward striking up a long-distance friendship with a pen pal – but she turns out to be white. And then things get interesting, and dangerous, and all knotted up. The drama builds to an astonishing climax of racial role-playing and unfettered violence, and it's hard not to think about Cain and Abel and how they got to where they got. My brother, my enemy. Director Jones comments in his program notes on the question of hope at the end of the story: "In this case, I can't find it." But he adds: "(T)here is truth. And no progress happens without truth." That pretty well sums it up.

Profile's Fugard season has been well-produced in general, but technical credits for "Blood Knot" stand out even in good company. Kristeen Willis Crosser's set is shorn down and immensely playable, and costumer Jessica Bobillot helps the actors achieve a brilliant transformation that lifts the play, with the donning of a suit, into a crucial and frightening passage of almost magical realism. Ruth Nardecchia's subtle lighting is especially effective in scene changes. And Sharath Patel's sound design is absolutely brilliant, never overreaching and usually barely noticed yet underscoring the action and laying down currents of tension that draw the mood taut almost to a breaking point. This is intimate, total theater.