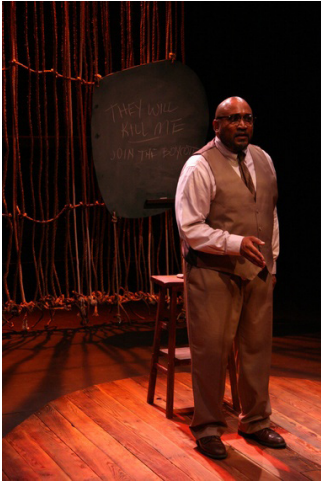


Profile Theatre review: 'My Children, My Africa' follows the tracks of hope through Apartheid's dark places

By Marty Hughley, The Oregonian

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For Mr. M, a teacher in a South African township, the power of learning is a better way to effect change than “slogans and stone throwing” and school boycotts. Bobby Bermea portrays Mr. M in Profile Theatre’s production of “My Children, My Africa.”
Kristeen Crosser

Thanks to a book by our current President, Americans have become accustomed to pairing the words “hope” and “audacity.” Hope is bold, optimistic, uncomplicated. But to Anela Myalatya, a black South African teacher who students call simply Mr. M, hope is a “dangerous animal” that has broken loose and is looking for food.

For the fiercely dedicated Mr. M, a self-described “black Confucian,” hope is focused on a generation of promising students (“I feed young people to my hope,” he says), especially the bright, enthusiastic Thami Mbikwana. But a wilder, even more desperate hope, hungry for cataclysmic change, also stalks the Apartheid-oppressed townships.

Athol Fugard’s 1989 drama “My Children, My Africa,” getting a sensitive, deeply engaging treatment at Profile Theatre by artistic director Adriana Baer, tracks both animals, so to speak, as they try to capture the heart of Thami (pronounced like “Tommy”), a natural young leader. And, as do many Fugard plays, it wrestles with the nature of moral and social authority, and with the difficulty of right action within a fundamentally unjust system.

Helping to embody Mr. M’s dreams of education and reconciliation is Isabel, a white teen who teams with Thami for a big quiz competition, and it’s Chelsie Kinney’s committed, finely shaded performance in that role which serves as the fulcrum of this strong production. Gilbert Feliciano (though he fought some opening-night language fumbles) makes something emotionally credible of both Thami’s boyish sweetness and rebellious conviction. As Mr. M, the reliable stage veteran Bobby Bermea is simultaneously joyful, worried, driven, resolute.

Kristeen Willis Crosser’s subtle, simple scenic design and the almost subterranean suggestions of Sharath Patel’s sound design help tighten the tension. And the story’s resolution confirms that hope -- whether audacious or desperate -- must take as well as give.

-- Marty Hughley