

'Blood Knot' review: Profile Theatre delivers powerful production of apartheid-era drama

By Richard Wattenberg For The Oregonian/OregonLive
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Don Kenneth Mason (left) and Ben Newman play two brothers torn apart by racial assumptions in Profile Theatre's "Blood Knot."

For some among us, President Barack Obama's victory in the 2012 Election truly heralded the arrival of a post-racial America. But there is good reason not to be too hasty in our optimism. Racism, unfortunately, has deep roots.

This sad truth is at the heart of Athol Fugard's disturbing 1961 drama "Blood Knot" now receiving a powerful production from Profile Theatre. Set in the apartheid dominated South Africa of 1961, this play, which established Fugard's reputation in the United States when it was successfully produced off-Broadway in 1964, examines the horrendous impact of a climate of racism on two brothers, Zachariah and Morris--the first one dark-skinned and the other light.

After a long time away, Morris returns home and joins his brother living in a one-room shack in the "non-white location" of Korsten, Port Elizabeth. Morris keeps house and Zach takes on menial jobs to support them. Together they try to recall an innocent past and dream of a more fulfilling future, but are ultimately unable to free themselves of the bitter resentments and jealousies that can be traced back to their differences in skin color.

At two hours plus this two-hander may seem longer than it need be -- indeed, there was a 90-minute BBC TV version in 1967 directed by Robin Midgley that Fugard himself praised. Still, Kevin Jones, director of the Profile Theatre production, skillfully shapes the action and draws very strong performances from Don Kenneth Mason and Ben Newman who play Zach and Morris.

Newman vividly presents the fair-skinned Morris's struggle with the temptation to pass, and Mason ably portrays the pained ambivalence of the darker-complexioned Zach, who loves his brother while detesting the disdain he occasionally feels from him and envying the better treatment his brother received even from their mother.

Early on, Newman's Morris energetically hustles about the brothers' decrepit shack (which is artfully conjured from slats of packing-case wood by scene designer Kristeen Willis Crosser) tending to the needs of Mason's worn and weary Zach. The two actors complement each other well, but the way in which Newman's alert, ever-watchful Morris almost obsessively tries to contain and manage Mason's slower and more sensual Zach, and the way in which Mason's Zach sometimes responds with a sluggish impatience, suggest the underlying tensions that later surface more violently.

There are, however, moments when the positive chemistry between the two brothers is dominant; the two actors especially capture the warmth between the brothers in the scene that closes the first act. Sitting side by side on a box, they re-create a childhood game during which they pretend to speedily drive off into a distant idyllic nature away from society and its social and racial hierarchies. Here arm and arm with broad smiles the actors convey the affections and love that bind them together.

And yet Newman and Mason are perhaps most effective when conveying the explosive emotions that arise when events suck Morris and Zach into a vortex of racial anxiety. In these moments the tensions that are latent from the start flair up with hellish force supported well by Ruth Nardecchia's nightmarish lighting and Shareth Patel's unnerving almost subliminal atmospheric sound effects .

In the end we are left with brothers torn apart by racial assumptions--brothers who take on a rich allegorical significance that much to our dismay still resonates.

-- Richard Wattenberg