

A masterful ‘Harold,’ a hopey-changey tickler

Personal meets political in a Fugard classic and a crankily entertaining American family dramedy

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Benedict, Wedderburn, Bermea: a Fugard trifecta. Photo: Jamie Bosworth

Theater is storytelling, action, language, stuff coming at you full force, in real time, right in front of your face. Yet often it's at its very best in its quietest moments: those fleeting, sometimes almost imperceptible chasms in the action when the curtains part on a character's soul and the audience stares deep into a fundamental realization or a universe of unsuspected possibilities.

Last weekend on Portland stages, at least a couple of those marvelous time-fissures occurred – once, in Profile Theatre's excellent revival of Athol Fugard's brilliant 1982 play "Master Harold ... and the boys," when Bobby Bermea's eyes told the audience that an irretrievable insult had changed the world; once, in Richard Nelson's smartly argumentative family dramedy "That Hopey Changey Thing" at Third Rail Rep, when a moment of lostness on Bruce Burkhardt's face revealed that Uncle Benjamin wasn't just not paying attention: some major cog had slipped.

As the city's newest theater season pulls out of the driveway and merges into rush-hour traffic, both productions mark beginnings of sorts. "Master Harold" is the first show in Profile Theatre's season of plays by Fugard, the eminent South African writer who dared to collaborate with black actors during the depths of apartheid and write about urgent racial and political matters. "Hopey Changey" is the first of a projected quartet of plays by Nelson about the state of contemporary American politics, as filtered through a single extended family in and around New York, and Third Rail Rep has made a commitment to produce all four, one apiece in the next four seasons. "Hopey Changey" is a good play. "Master Harold" is very likely a great one. And Portland theatergoers can celebrate, because both plays are receiving productions worthy of their challenges.

Just three performers take the stage in “Master Harold … and the boys,” and yet they create an entire world, both macrocosmic and microcosmic. It’s a story of the unlikely and unequal friendship among two black men and a not-quite-grown white boy, and also about the intended and unintended consequences of apartheid, of racial inequity and prejudices, of the muddle that occurs when personal impulses, political dictates, and ingrained cultural beliefs overlap and clatter against each other. As in a Chekhov play, nothing happens and everything happens: sympathetic characters surprise themselves into reluctant conflict, something foolish and impulsive yet also seemingly fated takes place, and the world turns. The play’s small cataclysm occurs on a stormy Port Elizabeth afternoon in 1950 in a little family-run tea room, where schoolboy Hally arrives as the family servants, Sam and Willie, are gliding across the storefront floor in anticipation of the big ballroom dancing contest, and anticipates the equally stormy political dances to play out across South Africa in the lives and careers of Steve Biko, Bishop Tutu, Presidents De Klerk and Mandela, and millions of ordinary citizens, black and white.

“Master Harold” is also, in a fictional way, the story of Fugard himself – not exactly autobiographical, but close enough to it. In that, too, it marks a beginning: the crisis that at least metaphorically shaped the writer’s passage to adulthood and the social commitment with which we know, from hindsight, that he emerged. So as shattering as “Master Harold” might seem onstage, we know it also will have something very like a happy, if hard-won, ending. As easy as Fugard claims the story was to craft, its subject must have been painful to approach, because it digs deep and doesn’t allow young Hally, Fugard’s stand-in, a lot of excuses. I’ve seen performances of this play where Hally comes across as an amiable, likable kid who makes a huge mistake because he’s trapped inside the presumption of superiority that apartheid bred among the country’s white citizens. So far, so good. But in this production, director Jane Unger and actor Sam Benedict face up to some uglier truths about Hally, who – such is the insidiousness of a racially based system of cultural stratification – is not just victim but also perpetrator. Benedict’s version of the young master of the household is that he’s a mess: quick and curious and even daring, but also a didact, an intellectual snob, impulsive, resentful, an unconscious bully, a little boy pretending to be a man, and much of his impetuous, grating brashness created as a defense mechanism against a dreary home life dominated by a racist drunk of a dad and an overly compliant mom. He’s a plain irritating kid, awkward and unvarnished, but with possibilities, and that sense of a braver personality lurking behind the brusque and easy one, a potentially better Hally once he’s freed of the constrictions of his home, parallels the possibilities of an entire nation if only it can find a way out from under the prejudices and handicaps of its present and past. Benedict makes Hally such an exasperating prig that you want to grind your teeth – and that’s exactly the sort of tension the drama needs.

Intriguingly, the two black characters seem to have more hope than Hally does, although their hope is on a measured scale, and, in Willie’s case, it’s tarnished by a brutal streak that echoes the brutality of his own social position. Garfield Wedderburn does a lovely job of portraying a character who is simultaneously sweet and funny – he can almost taste that elusive dancing trophy – and hobbled by emotions he can’t control: His partner has disappeared just two weeks before the contest because when he gets frustrated with her work on the dance floor, he beats her.

It’s Sam, though, who is Hally’s proponent and antagonist, and guide, and in almost every way his better. And Bermea gives a rich and wonderfully complex performance, if the downward-spiraling and fatefully unobservant young Hally would only notice it, as this toweringly moral and graceful character. Sam is the father that Hally’s biological father can never be: a steady, wise, patient, humorous, and almost preternaturally understanding figure, a man who offers Hally the most daring sort of love: the love of an underling who must cross cultural and even legal barriers to be an authority figure to his own “master.”



Weddeburn and Bermea: the dance of hope. Photo: Jamie Bosworth

Bermea does a magnificent job of showing how Sam, with the greatest of difficulty, keeps his own dignity in check in order to guide this fierce and injured child to a better life than he, Sam, can never know. As Bermea portrays him, Sam is a man of deep and abiding humor, who nevertheless has a line that cannot be crossed. When it is, not just foolish Hally, but also Sam himself, faces what may be the most crucial turning point in his life.

I was lucky enough in 1985 to see Fugard co-starring on Broadway with Zakes Mokae in his own play “Blood Knot,” a murkier drama than “Master Harold,” and his performance was a revelation: pixieish, painfully funny, frazzled and careworn, Beckett-like in its music-hall comedy and reminiscent physically of a slyly fumbling and floppy Buster Keaton. It cut across the grain of the play’s serious themes and brought a sense of antic joy to a drama headed in a far more drastic direction. Sam is a different character in a different play, and Bermea’s performance isn’t like Fugard’s in its particulars. But it is in its effect: it adds warmth and humor and a kind of theatrical joy to the play’s serious goings-on. In Profile’s little home space in the Theater! Theatre! building, where performers and audience can practically touch each other, he uses those silent but eloquent eyes to maximum effect. And he reminds us that however serious a play may be, the theater is also entertainment.

Some people criticize “Master Harold” for being too schematic, and certainly it’s neatly balanced with its echoes and thematic parallels. Contemporary drama tends to be messier, less constricted by the niceties of form. But that’s only fashion. Like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, playwrights who also had big things on their minds, Fugard is foursquare and unironic. Thirty years after its debut “Harold” still seems emotionally urgent and politically pertinent to the current state of world affairs. After Sunday’s matinee performance I ran into Unger, Profile’s recently retired founder and the director of this show, and told her I’d forgotten what a good play “Master Harold” is. “I wish we’d had another month to rehearse it,” she replied. “Every day we discover new layers to explore.” Classics have a way of being like that. But this production has layers and layers and layers already waiting to explore, and I strongly suggest you do it – maybe in tandem with “Seven Guitars,” by August Wilson, the great American theatrical explorer of racial matters, which opens Friday at Artists Rep. Good stuff goin’ on.