

Theater review: ‘Master Harold ... and the Boys’ offers hope in days of apartheid

By Carol Wells For The Oregonian

on October 07, 2012 at 2:00 PM, updated October 07, 2012 at 2:24 PM



“Master Harold ... and the Boys” is set in 1950 deftly staged like a dance.

South African playwright Athol Fugard set “Master Harold ... and the Boys” in 1950, when to dream of the end of apartheid seemed like madness, and yet that is what Sam, a waiter at a teashop, dares to do. A dedicated ballroom dancer, he sees his art form as a metaphor for the perfectibility of human life. The production by Profile Theatre is directed by Jane Unger as a dance, the steps deftly executed until the final, elegant turn.

Sam, played by Bobby Bermea, has been a father figure to Hally (the Master Harold of the title), his employer’s son. But Sam is black and Hally is white. When Hally becomes angry with Sam, the dance becomes personal, edgy and frightening.

Bermea delivers a performance taut with subtlety, where every small shift of facial and body expression leverages maximum impact. This is often the way people in oppressive societies who wish to keep their dignity learn to behave. When he breaks this protocol with a sudden, disdainful act, the effect is all the more unsettling.

Sam Benedict plays Hally with a young man’s coiled rage, taken out on Sam, whom he initially believes to be weaker than he is.

And Garfield Wedderburn makes Willie, the other black employee at the shop, a steady, charismatic character despite his lack of insight about his own behavior. For example, he must be made to understand that beating his girlfriend is driving her away. Both have internalized the message of apartheid, but the play ends with the dancers gliding toward hope.