

***My Children! My Africa!* (Profile Theatre)**

Starts with sugar, ends with meat.

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For the first 45 minutes of Profile Theatre's *My Children! My Africa!*, you may think a latter-day Mr. Chips has single-handedly defeated the entire edifice of 1980s-era South African apartheid with nothing but the love of learning and a few lines of Wordsworth.

Privileged white prep-school girl Isabel (Chelsie Kinney) visits a black township school and bonds with promising student Thami (Gilbert Feliciano) and especially his energetic teacher, Mr. M (Bobby Bermea); what follows is some of the more saccharine dialogue ever put to stage.

Mr. M wants to get Isabel and Thami together for a literary quiz bowl, and Isabel couldn't be more excited. As his students throw lines from the *Lake Poets* back and forth, Mr. M wipes his brow and declares that all this insane hope is making him sweat.

But anyone who knows the politicized work of South African playwright Athol Fugard knows we don't have some cheap Michelle Pfeiffer moment of racial harmony waiting for us at the end of the play. As the young Thami moves further and further into the struggles that defined South Africa in the '80s (it's set during the mid-decade township uprisings that left more than 600 dead), the play becomes not so much a conflict over a few children's lives, but rather an examination of how apartheid ruined everyone it touched. It is an Aristotelian tragedy in which the flaws of each person's character are determined by terrible history.

Any three-person play puts a heavy burden on its performers—especially since director Adriana Baer's minimalist staging places all attention squarely on their interplay—and the actors acquit themselves admirably, despite some wavering on difficult South African accents.

Bermea in particular has a natural warmth, charisma and decency that carry the show through some of its dodgier script moments; Kinney and Feliciano are much younger actors, and this sometimes shows up as unsure footing early on, but the pair's depth of feeling in the closing scenes allow the play to find its full emotional resonance.

It's a shame that one has to sit so long through a patchy prelude to reach the pathos and subtlety that characterize the play's climax and conclusion, but it is a price worth paying. It has been almost 30 years since the events in question, but the struggles the play depicts are, if anything, even more relevant.