

REVIEWS

MASTER HAROLD... AND THE BOYS

at Grove Theatre Center/Burbank

Reviewed by Anne Louise Bannon

The first thing we are struck by in this inaugural presentation by the Ascending Artists Stage Company is

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the lyricism of Athol Fugard's work. This is also a tribute to the fabulous work done by the three-member cast: James Pass, James Gerakden, and Rich Ronat. Apartheid may be gone. We may actually be sliding into an era of greater racial tolerance, if not acceptance. But Fugard's play will live on because it not only tackles these weighty subjects but also the themes of parental love and family and what we do to those we love.

Set in 1950, shortly after the establishment of South Africa's failed system of racial separation, black servants Willie and Sam prepare for a local ballroom-dance competition in a tearoom in Port Elizabeth. Willie (Pass) is the younger and simpler of the two, and Sam (Gerald), though uneducated, is indeed the wise old man. White young Master Harold (Ronat), full of the anger of late adolescence, drops by to do his homework. That Sam and Willie call him Hallie—an inappropriate informality from servants—speaks volumes. But as the three reminisce about Hallie's youth, it becomes clear that Hallie has good reason for his anger, which eventually spills over into the unforgivable.

Director Nick Mize seems content to let the action unfold at its own casual pace. It may seem a little slow at first, but Mize lets the storytelling unfold just right to keep it compelling. Of course, if he didn't have these performances, no amount of pacing would have saved the production. Gerald, Pass, and Ronat give their tales real depth and richness. Ronat also walks the finest of lines, not so pulled in that we can't see the depths of this young man's rage, but not beating us over the head with it, either, so that when he does finally explode it is completely organic and fully realized. Gerald, too, gives us just enough. He is fully committed and it shows. He handles the language and the accent with even more ease than Ronat (who was born in South Africa, although he left when he was 8). The actors were coached in the dialect by Sandie Massie. But the rhythms in Gerald's work flow from the character. This is Sam's voice we're hearing, not something Gerald put on. It would be easy to diminish Pass' work because it is less noticeable. Willie is a simple man, but that is no easy task to play well and make believable, and that's exactly what Pass does.

Joe Weiss's set has the look of real money behind it, even though it as perfectly run-down as it should be. The same goes for Caroline Cunningham's costumes. This production is in association with Grove Theatre Center's new Burbank operation. Ascending Artists is the first outside group on the new space. And if this is the caliber of work that GTC is going to bring in (and we can only hope that it is), then let us see a lot more.

"Master Harold... and the Boys," presented by Ascending Artists Stage Company at GTC/Burbank, 1100 W. Clark St., Burbank. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Jan. 25-Feb. 17. \$17.50. (323) 655-8587.

BURN THIS

at the Lillian Theater

photo by Christopher Vore

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