

## An unsparing look at pain of apartheid

**ACT'S 'BLOOD KNOT' TAPS INTO OUTRAGE OF ATHOL FUGARD**

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

[Mercury News](#)

Athol Fugard so potently forged his writing from the fresh wounds of political strife that his name became synonymous with the tragedy of apartheid.

In masterpieces from "Master Harold . . . and the Boys" to "A Lesson from Aloes," Fugard turned the guts and bile of South African social injustice into great works of art. His 1961 breakthrough play "Blood Knot," now in a rare and disturbingly affecting revival at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, forever established him as a voice of poetry and compassion in a time of fire.

While this early play may lack the subtlety of his most famous works, "Blood Knot" is fueled by the same gut-churning urgency that drives Fugard's classics. Apartheid may be a thing of the past, but the playwright's cry of outrage still rattles the soul.

Tenderly directed by Charles Randolph-Wright and gilded by Tracy Chapman's honeyed score, "Blood Knot" unravels the tangle of race and identity that is, alas, as painfully relevant to the presidential election today as it was to Fugard's homeland in the 1960s.

The color of a man's skin marks his fate in Fugard's sorrowful past. Trapped amid the corrugated steel and rotting wood of Port Elizabeth's shantytowns (exquisitely denoted by Alexander V. Nichols' set), two brothers find themselves shackled to each other and grimly plodding toward a bleak future.

Zachariah (Steven Anthony Jones) is the doer, his existence soiled by day upon day of backbreaking toil and debased by the lot of a black man in a white world. Morris (Jack Willis) is the thinker, putting aside their pennies in the vain hope of outrunning their bleak destiny.

They share the same genes but not the same spirit. Zach is content to put his head down and plow ahead. Morris yearns for better life but since his skin is so light he can pass for white, his optimism blooms from a toxic spring. No matter what Zach does, he can never share in that dream. His nightmare follows him wherever he goes.

The air in the squalid shack is thick with the desperate intimacy of two people bound together against the world. They are two halves of the same whole irrevocably divided from their true selves.

Willis delicately suggests the pain that lines Morris' face, while Jones finds the majesty in aching for beauty in an age of ugliness. These two master actors nail the musicality of the language, the cadences and lulls of the dialect.

These rhythms entice us into following wherever the brothers lead, even when their childish tugs-of-war slip into terrifying mind games that reek as foully as the industrial wasteland they call home. Fugard deconstructs the abuse of power in a bizarre role-playing ritual that smacks of Jean Genet's "The Maids." Morris plays the master and Zachariah the servant as the stain of racism blots their hearts.

Chapman's mellifluous score bubbles out from under the action, like the ghost of their late mother, singing to fill the quiet. While the music threatens to overwhelm the production at the start, by the second act, her composition fits more snugly into the elegiac ecosystem of the play.

The startling realism of Randolph-Wright's staging grounds this "Blood Knot." The bare feet pounding on the dirt; the alarm clock sounding off in daily mockery of bone-weary limbs; the naked grief in the eyes; this is their cycle of life. The details of their perpetual oppression cut so deeply that the haunted past seems just at our heels.

### **'Blood Knot'**

Written by Athol Fugard, music

composed and recorded by Tracy Chapman

By Karen D'Souza

The upshot: A sensitive revival of a play about the stain of racism under apartheid with disturbing relevance to the here and now.

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco.

Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes (one intermission).

Tickets: \$17-\$82.

Information: (415) 749-2228 or go to [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org).

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Contact Karen D'Souza at [kdsouza@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdsouza@mercurynews.com) or (408) 271-377.