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My Children' Opens Oldcastle's Spring

Entertainment

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BENNINGTON — "My Children/My Africa," a powerfully moving play about the end of apartheid in South Africa, comes to Bennington Center for the Arts as a joint production between Oldcastle Theatre Company and East Tennessee State University, March 6, 7 and 8.

South Africa's anti-apartheid rebellion is raging. Teacher Mr. M seeks a quiet, civilized war of words. His protégé and favorite pupil Thami is tired of Mr. M's genteel "whispering." He wants to learn to shout. Ingenuous Isabel just can't find the sense in the senseless things going on around her and the anger between her two favorite people. There is nothing pretty about playwright Athol Fugard's brutally realistic tableaux of the personal destruction often wreaked by the battle for equality in his play, "My Children/My Africa."

"Fugard's message could be bundled neatly into the notion that violence never solves anything, even fueled by the right cause," said Herb Parker, veteran Oldcastle actor ("I'm Not Rappaport," "The Little Foxes") and ETSU professor who plays Mr. M in the production. "Just like there were blacks in America who wanted to go slower, who mistrusted violence and lawlessness as a tool versus a younger generation, such as the Black Panthers, whose motto was, 'by any means necessary.'

"There have been many necessary wars in world history, wars which absolutely had to be fought. And yet all of them exact a price, always a price, in the loss of our young treasure, even though it might have been just. What is right? What is wrong? The question is left up to the individual."

"I've seen too much of it — wasted people, wasted chances," says Mr. M, who wants to "fight the lunacy" with the intellectual, rather than the physical. Parker's thoughtful Mr. M is an "old-fashioned" and extraordinary black teacher in a South African township during the peak of anti-apartheid boycotts and rebellion.

Thami is portrayed by Matthew Paessler, a young actor and theater major at East Tennessee State University. Thami decides to stop learning in Mr. M's traditional classroom and take his education to the streets. Caught in the middle, Rebekah Shibao as Isabel, hurts for both friends, yet is powerless in the struggle's vortex.

Isabel calls it the "dreaded unrest." To Thami, it's "the beginning." For Mr. M, it is an end.

The play has been directed by Oldcastle Theatre Company's Producing Artistic Director, Eric Peterson. The play ran for six performances at the university and Peterson is eagerly anticipating the cast's arrival from Tennessee. "They are a joy to work with. The young people are highly enthusiastic. They worked hard and their performances grew each day. Herb is a marvelous actor and gives an emotionally powerful performance. This joint production has enabled Oldcastle to continue our educational efforts and to cast the play in an age-appropriate manner. The play is being produced under a different union contract than we usually have to allow the students to perform. My month at ETSU was a joy and we are talking about further collaborations."

Long-time Oldcastle stage manager, Diane Healy, stage managed the production in Tennessee as she will in Vermont.

Appreciation abounds for the playwright, born of an Africaner mother and Irish Roman Catholic father. "There's something extraordinary about a playwright who is able to clearly express the thoughts and feelings of a young black African male, a young white South African female and an aging black teacher," Peterson said. "That's an extraordinary achievement."

The play is a battle between opposing forces seeking the same outcome but with very different means.

"He's got eyes and ears but he sees nothing and hears nothing," Thami rants to Isabel. "He is out of touch with what is really happening to us blacks ... His ideas about change are the old-fashioned ones. And what have they achieved? Nothing."

In his old fashioned way, Mr. M doggedly believes in a peaceful solution, a war of words which he says are "sacred."

And above all, Mr. M believes that education can banish ignorance. "If you are not in that classroom tomorrow, you will be a very, very silly boy," says Mr. M, exploding. "You are a silly boy now and without an education, you will grow up to be a stupid man!" The polite debate that starts the play has evolved into an all-out war by play's end.

"My Children/My Africa" will have performances Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., and Saturday afternoon at 2 p.m., March 6-8. Ticket prices for this special production are \$24, balcony seats are \$15 and student tickets at \$12. For reservations or information call Oldcastle Theatre Company at 447-0564.