CHICAGO SUN-TIMES March 30, 2010

Lyrical 'Boys' an eye-opener

REVIEW | Bravos for world premiere

Comments
March 30, 2010
BY HEDY WEISS Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com

Several tall, young, slender African men bearing beaming smiles and the slightest hint of ritual scars on their foreheads strolled through the lobby of the Victory Gardens Theater on Sunday night. They were the real "lost boys" of Sudan -- victims of the horrific civil wars that raged in that enormous, oil-rich country from 1983 to 2005, leaving the population decimated. Now twentysomething, and residents of Chicago, the men had come to watch playwright Lonnie Carter's immensely imaginative, linguistically dizzying, tragicomic rendering of their history. To be sure, it's a fantasia rather than a documentary, but one that captures the essence of their experiences in a uniquely theatrical way.

Anyone familiar with Carter's distinctive work (most memorably, "The Romance of Magno Rubio," a 2004 Victory Gardens hit), knows that this white writer possesses an uncanny knack for working impossibly brainy, witty and emotionally charged verbal and musical twists on contemporary black street lingo and pop rhythms.

» Click to enlarge image



Samuel G. Roberson Jr. (from left), Namir Smallwood and Leslie Ann Sheppard star in Victory Gardens Theater's Chicago premiere of "The Lost Boys of Sudan."

'THE LOST BOYS OF SUDAN'
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

- Through April 25

- Victory Gardens Biograph Theatre, 2433 N. Lincoln
- Tickets, $20-$48
- (773) 871-3000; *www.victorygardens.org*

Carter also has a special gift for suggesting cultural fragmentation, disorientation and synthesis. And in Jim Corti's superbly "choreographed" world premiere production, a bravura, ever-morphing cast of eight actors easily makes the impossibly complicated psychological odyssey from rural, war-ravaged Sudan to all-American Fargo, N.D., (where many of the "lost boys" were resettled) come to life. It is an impressive, beautifully evocative journey on every level.

The play's first act is set in Africa, where A.I. Josh (the lyrical, gentle Namir Smallwood), T-Mac Sam (the sassy, energetic Samuel G. Roberson, Jr.) and K-Gar Ollie (the ever-luminous Leslie Ann Sheppard, as the Shakespeareanlike girl-disguised-as-a-boy) are subjected to unspeakable, disorienting brutality before finally making their way to a refugee camp in Kenya.

By the second act, these three quite individual personalities have boarded a plane (a terrific scene), and landed in America, where they are promptly handed winter coats, introduced to flush toilets, locked doors, microwaves and proms. They also meet that completely "alien" species, American blacks, as they adapt to their new lives in ways both funny and painful.

Bravos for the exceptional performances of Kenn E. Head, Latricia Kamiko Sealy, Nambi E. Kelley, Ann Joseph and Adeoye. And cheers to the remarkable lost boys.