Lost Boys of Sudan' at VG: Teens tell a truthful story — North Dakota, fanciful poetry and all

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THEATER REVIEW: "The Lost Boys of Sudan" ★★★½ *Through April 25 at Victory Gardens at the Biograph, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.; Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes; Tickets: $20-$48 at 773-871-3000 and www.victorygardens.org. With Leslie Ann Sheppard, Namir Smallwood and Samuel G. Roberson, Jr.*

Lonnie Carter, the author of “The Lost Boys of Sudan,” is a playwright with a beat poet lurking inside. Sometimes his characters act and talk like other playwright's characters. But then Carter's fancy takes them and they lurch into a kind of blanket authorial poetry, spoken without undue concern for the veracity of the individual.

“You can reach for every star,” says a highschool football coach in Fargo, N.D. “Aren't you glad you came this far?” Or, as one of his students remarks, casually: “As I served up some waffles / At Holy Apostles.”

Once Carter finds Midwestern words like “chips and spicy dips” to play with, he can dunk them for hours. But there's a good chance this won't seem strange to you as you sit

there at Victory Gardens, being as “The Lost Boys of Sudan” also features a talking cow. Who is not there for comic effect.

With the wrong material, Carter's singular take on language and drama can seem forced or, at best, esoteric. But with this play about the youthful Sudanese refugees who find themselves (during intermission) flown out of the dangerous bush, away from the elders and the elephants and the men with AK-47s, and into the flatlands of North Dakota, with its prom dates and video games and microwaves, he has found precisely the right material. And in director Jim Corti, precisely the right guy to stage his fluid, heartfelt expressions.

Much as, say, Sofia Coppola's “Lost in Translation” was an excellent movie about jet lag, this is an excellent play about culture shock. And about making your way as a stranger in a strange land.

“What are we part of now?” wonders one of the Lost Boys. “Have we ever had a part that's ours?”

With great tenderness, humor and concern for their dignity, Carter charts the course of a beautifully acted and wholly lovable Sudanese teenage trio. A.I. Josh (Namir Smallwood) and T-Mac Sam (Samuel G. Roberson, Jr.) are really lost boys. K-Gar Ollie (Leslie Ann Sheppard) is really a lost girl masquerading as a lost boy, being as lost girls rarely made it out of the bush unscathed.

In Act One, the members of this tight trio are flung around Sudan, winding up in a refugee camp populated by teachers who warn them about fast food and Skittles. In Act Two, they are dropped on Fargo, which might as well be the moon.

They wonder if North Dakota will be at war with South Dakota, just as the northern reaches of Sudan fight the south. They turn up the thermostat to boiling point as a frigid wind whips around their bodies. And, most important, they feel what most immigrants feel: relief at being in the land of the proud and the free and uncertain about their relationship with home. The language might be out-there, but there's no question that the feelings are real. When K-Gar ponders a return to Sudan, she points out that job one will be to make sure that there is, in fact, a place at which to go back. And you don't need an affinity for poetry or rhyme to understand that imperative.

Corti, whose specialty is musicals, is smart enough not to force Carter into some kind of realistic box, forging instead a simple, fluid landscape that, especially once our heroes arrive in Fargo, pops with honesty and whimsy. Like the Coen brothers (who love this same human and physical landscape), Carter satirizes the good people of the Upper Midwest while celebrating their fundamental decency (the equally ebullient Kenn E. Head and Adeoye play enigmatic characters in the boys' new world).

But Corti also doesn't let the show disappear into its own poetic navel, instead casting the show with implacably honest actors like Ann Joseph (who plays one of the boys'

American teachers), who can reign in any lyrical excess. Most, anyway. The result is a hugely enjoyable show that feels fresh and free enough to avoid the predictable moralizing that often accompanies plays with such earnest topics, but real enough for anyone to immediately know what these lost boys (and girl) feel.

This play was first seen in an earlier form at the Children's Theatre of Minneapolis and it remains, I think, a fabulous show for older kids and teenagers. If you've got difficult members of those particular tribes at home, it might help them appreciate how lucky there are not to have to worry about someone sending them back, wherever “back” may be.

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