Stunning 'Lost Boys' tells tale of joy, survival
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"The Lost Boys of Sudan," which is getting a spectacular in-the-round staging at the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, turns out to be more joyous than the title might suggest.

By now, most Americans ought to be at least vaguely familiar with the story of the estimated 25,000 young male survivors of the oil-fueled Sudanese conflict between Muslims and Christians and about the effort to resettle many of the victims in the United States. Several documentaries have been made about their ordeals, and by coincidence, one film produced last year by National Geographic, "God Grew Tired of Us," recently opened in the Twin Cities.

But theater sometimes can do what documentaries sometimes can't - tell stories with the power of poetry, metaphor and music. The only problem with CTC's production is that each moment in the large-cast production has been so extensively choreographed and elaborated with technical effects the frequent result is sensory overload.

But that's a quibble arising from disappointment in not being able to savor all the musical language in Lonnie Carter's script. There's a palpable sense of magical realism in his play, and CTC's artistic director Peter C. Brosius has exploited it beautifully by using many of the techniques of story and dance theater.

The story follows the journey of three boys as they trek 1,000 miles from their devastated village to a refugee camp in Kenya and from there to the hilariously bizarre world of Fargo, N.D.

By the time they get to Middle America, we are seeing the world from their perspective, and North Dakota has become a foreign land. When this kind of thing is pulled off, it becomes one of the delights about going to the theater.

In spite of the horror visited upon them in their homeland, the boys live in a world where cattle - in this case, a chorus of actors wearing rope yokes around their necks - speak with the wisdom of oracles and where everyday conversation is itself a plaything to be



enjoyed.

They have much to overcome - including the deaths of their families, enslavement, guerrillas, crocodiles and hunger. These horrors are not ignored, but neither are they given gratuitous weight. Staged in swirling dancelike scenes, the saga in Africa has the quality of a nightmare. And when the boys arrive in Fargo (in a stunning scene change) and are introduced to adolescent video games, the nightmares return.

The performance is a first-rate example of ensemble acting, but the standouts are the three young men portraying the boys: Samuel G. Roberson Jr., Andre Samples and Namir Smallwood. While never ceasing to be boyish, they convey the message that is the heart of the play: the resiliency of the human spirit.

Surrounding them is a cast of actors in multiple roles, each of them given a memorable turn. The action of the play is a whirl of shifting bodies and locales, with stunning light, sound and scenic shifts. As a piece of technical, in-your-face theater, it's a triumph - all of it presented to an audience sitting on four rows of bench risers that surround the rectangular, floor-level performing space in CTC's black-box Cargill Stage.

A final caution to parents: The theater recommends "The Lost Boys of Sudan" for audiences older than 15. The elaborate staging would make any youngster gape, but the subject matter is strong, and the action is close enough to seem threatening to small children.

What: "The Lost Boys of Sudan," by Lonnie Carter

When: through April 22

Where: The Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Ave. S., Minneapolis

Tickets: $8-$28.

Information: www.childrenstheatre.org or 612-874-0400