Theater review: 'The Lost Boys of Sudan'
Lisa Brock, Special to the Star Tribune

When three Sudanese boys in a refugee camp first hear the mysterious words "Minnesota" and "Fargo," they attempt to parse their meanings and come up with "Tiny Soft Drink" and "Go Far." This is a small moment in "The Lost Boys of Sudan" that deftly captures the layered, poignant and often humorous quality of this stunning work, currently receiving its world premiere at Children's Theatre Company.

Obie-award-winning playwright Lonnie Carter puts a human face on Sudan's decades-long civil war by focusing on the effects it has on three Dinka boys. After their families and villages are destroyed by guerillas, the boys undertake a 1,000-mile journey to a refugee camp.

Braving hunger, attacks by warlords and a dangerous river crossing, they reach the small oasis of Camp Kakuma, only to face the question of what their futures hold. The second act transports the boys to Fargo, N. Dak., where they attempt to negotiate a strange and often incomprehensible environment while still trying to come to terms with their losses.

This production neither sentimentalizes this grueling story nor uses it as a soapbox. Instead, Carter's play builds layer upon layer of meaning through evocative language, humor and telling details that create a world that is simultaneously dreamlike and concrete. Luscious wordplay like one boy's revisionist take on "Hamlet" and insights into the mysteries of can openers and thermostats deftly draw the audience int! o the ce nter of these refugees' point-of-view.

The production offers an aural and scenic feast as it economically conjures two contrasting worlds through poetry, movement and light. The first act, bathed in a glowing earth-toned palette, communicates the boys' intense connections to their culture through a chorus of cows, while evoking the nightmarish violence of their lives through insistent drumbeats and choreographer Uri Sands' striking dance sequences. The Fargo half of the play, on the other hand, is infused with primary colors, harsh lights and blaring electronic noise, all the effects disconcertingly exaggerated to convey the boys' confused perceptions.

Powerful performances by Samuel G. Roberwson Jr., André Samples and Namir Smallwood as the three boys are another reason this production packs such a punch. While each imbues his character with a unique personality, the chemistry between the three is palpable. Shawn Hamilton, Marlette Knight and Sonja Parks are other standouts in an overall fine ensemble.

"Lost Boys" is simultaneously profoundly disturbing and joyously uplifting in its depiction of the power of the human spirit. It's a valuable addition to our current national conversation on refugees and will linger in the minds of its audiences long after it's over.

Lisa Brock is a Minneapolis writer.