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DESTINATIONS

Thicker than Water

Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot* Raises Tensions at Bowie State University Oct. 26

By Archana Pyati/Photos by Sheila Peake

Esteemed actor Danny Glover sat in the audience of Friday's performance of Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot* at Bowie State University, but the real star of the evening was the play itself. *Blood Knot* examines apartheid in South Africa through the explosive relationship between two brothers: one black and the other who passes for white.

Morris and Zachariah share a mother, but have different fathers, although the backstory here is left deliberately vague. Morris, the light-skinned one, has come to live with Zachariah in a one-room shack located in the townships, slums where blacks were restricted to living under apartheid. Apartheid was clearly a prison cell for both blacks and whites, and that's exactly what came across in John McAfee's set design for the Oct. 26 event. Two cots, a primitive kitchen set up, and corrugated metal decorated the brothers' dreary, one-room existence [view more photos of the event here].



First, a word about Fugard himself: a white Afrikaner, he directed and starred in *Blood Knot* with South African actor Zakes Mboke when it premiered in Johannesburg in 1961. The play was staged for a single performance and it was the first time a white and black person appeared on a stage at the same time in South Africa. Fugard, now 80, influenced generations of actors and playwrights, including Glover, who played Zachariah in a production of *Blood Knot* in the 1970s and starred in another Fugard masterpiece, *Master Harold and the Boys*, when it came to Broadway. During a post-show Q & A, Glover was unequivocal about Fugard's impact on his own career: "I am not an actor without Athol Fugard."

Directed by assistant professor Bob Bartlett with Glover acting as an artistic advisor, Bowie State's production shone due to pitch-perfect performances of its two leads, JaBen A. Early as Zachariah and D.C. Cathro as Morris, both professional actors based in Washington D.C. Early's Zachariah strode the set like a caged tiger, occupying that uncomfortable position—somewhere between rage and dependence—of the colonized. Cathro played the paternalistic Morris like a faded diva, holding on dearly to the little bit of relevance he has in Zachariah's life.



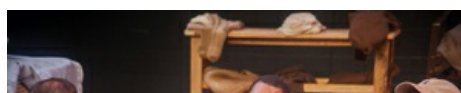
A power struggle between the two is evident from the first scene, and it seems weighted in Morris's favor. Unlike Zachariah, Morris can read and write, has lived in the outside world, and possesses an understanding of the finer things of life—"Culture" with a capital "C." Why Morris has chosen to return to the townships is a mystery—although guilt over abandoning his brother and failure to make it as a white man may have something to do with it.

Zachariah, meanwhile, is the household's bread-winner, earning a meager wage as laborer in a factory where his white overseers demean him. He rebuffs Morris's attempts at bonding because they seem too intertwined with a need to civilize: Zachariah is indifferent to the bath salts Morris lays out for him each night to relieve his foot sores or to Morris's lectures on saving money so they can escape the township to buy a farm together. Instead, Zachariah prefers to reminisce about his first sexual experience and a drinking buddy who never comes around anymore. He feels he's earned the right to indulge in life's pleasures, even when they skirt a dangerous line—like when he fantasizes about a white girl he corresponded with as a pen pal.



The pen pal idea is Morris's, serving as a weak substitute for the sexual thrills Zachariah seeks. Morris writes the letters while Zachariah dictates—another instance where Morris tries and fails to take charge of his brother's life. When the brothers find out she's white, Morris insist they burn her letters and forget the whole thing. "What sort of chap throws away a few kind words? The thought of a little white girl is better than plans or foot sores," responds Zachariah to Morris's insistence that a black man's fantasies are enough to impeach him in an apartheid state ("All they need for evidence is a man's dreams.")

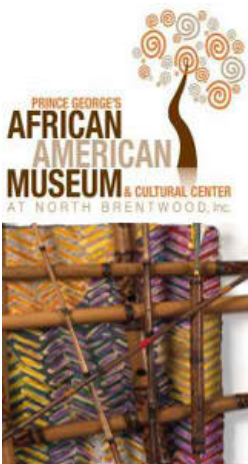
During the Q & A session, Bartlett noted that *Blood Knot* has been described as Fugard's "most pessimistic play," yet he felt a note of optimism by the play's end—perhaps an expression of Fugard's belief that reconciliation



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between blacks and whites under apartheid was possible. Both Glover and Bartlett agreed that the play transcends its historical context and could be about the shifting power dynamics and the violence inherent to any unequal relationship. And that's what makes *Blood Knot* a story we can all identify with, in Glover's view: "The audience is truly held there by the danger on stage that exists in their own hearts and souls." An episode in the second act brings this dangerous dance to a terrifying conclusion, when the brothers' true feelings about each other – expressed through a racially-charged fantasy sequence – surge forth, nearly destroying the domestic pretense they've concocted to co-exist



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