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Class struggle a "Master" work

By John Moore
 Denver Post Theater Critic



From left: Earlie Thomas, Leonard Barrett Jr. and Nathan Young in the Bas Bleu Theatre Company's "Master Harold." (Bas Bleu Theatre Company / William A. Cotton)

Fort Collins - That the world is turned all around and upside down in apartheid-era South Africa is evident from the very title of Athol Fugard's wrenching "Master Harold ... and the Boys." The "master" is but a randomly privileged white 17-year-old, his two black "boys" his elder attendants. The only way to make the point more clear would be if the rain pounding down throughout Bas Bleu Theatre Company's powerful new staging were instead pouring up.

For even though "Hally" has spent his young life freely sharing his wealth of academic knowledge with his beloved boys within a fragile bubble of racial harmony, it becomes sadly plain this endemic, pathetic little stripling will one day take his place in the unnatural order of things, perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and oppression. Not because he deserves the power but because he's been threatened and he's white - so he can.

Fugard is the master of distilling sweeping and complex societal struggles into three-character plays, and "Master Harold," set in 1950, is his masterpiece. Hally (Nathan Young) helps his unseen mother operate a tearoom in the absence of his crippled father, an institutionalized drunk who makes for a haunting symbol of a broken, violent patriarchy. The waiter Sam (Earlie Thomas) and the janitor Willie (Leonard Barrett Jr.) have worked here for years, with Sam assuming the role of Hally's gentle father figure.

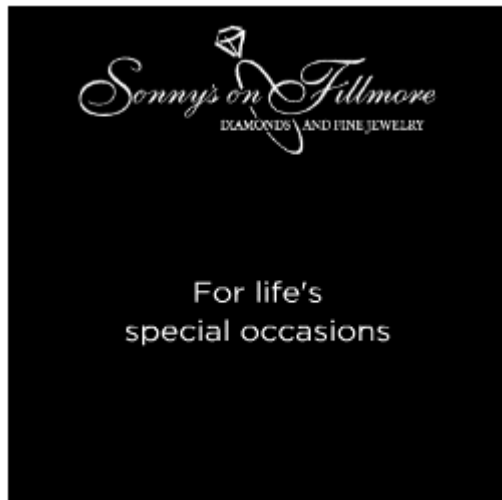
Willie wants only to learn how to ballroom dance, and so throughout, director Morris Burns has the wonderful Barrett either twirling in a state of existential freedom, or on his knees scrubbing floors. For Willie, there is no in-between.

This subtle class conflict develops over a rainy afternoon (on yet another set brilliantly conceived by Eric Corneliussen). Hally's school assignment is to report on a cultural phenomenon, and so this boy, with no real understanding of passion or art, chooses Willie's upcoming ballroom dancing contest.

Dancing is Fugard's metaphor for how South Africa might be, moving in gentle unison and perpetual harmony. But, Sam says, "none of us knows the steps ... we're bumping into each other all the time." And so collisions and violence result.

In "Master Harold," the collision is news that Hally's father is being sent home, unleashing in Hally a cauldron of emotional conflict and misplaced anger that he takes out on Sam. Deep down, Hally loves his father but also fears and is shamed by him, as many South Africans surely felt about their homeland. But he's unwilling to

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be made subservient in the new family order. If only "the boys" had similar recourse.

Burns elicits impeccable dialects and natural performances, notably Young's remarkable arc from a naïve boy who promises Sam there are social reformers in diapers who will one day "kick history in the pants," into a sniveling but omnipotent embodiment of apartheid itself. After their easygoing exchanges about Darwin, Descarte, Freud, Tolstoy and Lincoln, Hally's proactive restoration of the societal disorder is particularly tragic.

But this work rests squarely on the weary shoulders of Thomas, whose own amazing story only grows more so. Thomas, who grew up in Texas when it was illegal for black children to attend white schools, went on to fame with the Denver Broncos and 21 years ago joined the Colorado State University faculty as an entomology scientist despite a lifelong learning disability. He performed his first play two years ago at age 60, and here he again throws everything he has into a monstrous challenge.

Thomas is an inspiration, an actor whose inevitable inconsistencies are more than made up for by the riveting, honest conviction in his eye. Thomas has one moment in particular that proves one need not attend Juilliard to effectively communicate from the stage.

"It's all bad in here now," we are told. But Fugard leaves us with a welcome, humble message of hope: "Let's hope for better weather tomorrow."

Theater critic John Moore can be reached at 303-820-1056 or jmoore@denverpost.com.

*** / "Master Harold ... and the Boys"

DRAMA|Bas Bleu Theatre Company, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins |Written by Athol Fugard|Directed by Morris Burns|Starring Nathan Young, Earlie Thomas and Leonard Barrett Jr.|THROUGH SUNDAY|7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30

p.m. Sundays|1 hour, 40 minutes, no intermission|\$10-\$19 (2-for-1 Thursdays)
|970-498-8949; basbleu.org