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Article published Oct 13, 2005

Bas Bleu's 'Master Harold' misses its mark

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Much like the social change it depicts, Bas Bleu's latest production " 'Master Harold' ... and the Boys," is slow and sometimes awkward.

Written by South African playwright Athol Fugard, "Master Harold" takes place in a tea room in 1950s apartheid South Africa.

The drama focuses on three characters - Sam and Willie, black waiters who are rehearsing for an upcoming ballroom dance contest while they work, and Hally, the white owners' 17-year-old son.

The three discuss everything from dancing to history to fond memories from when Hally still wore short pants. But it's when talk turns to the impending return of Hally's alcoholic, crippled father that Hally's underlying prejudices come to the surface.

But the drama is a slow boil here, which can make for some long scenes that don't always further the story.

And little action leaves a lot of dialogue to fill in the blanks.

While the play itself is only 80 minutes long, scenes, including a discussion of favorite historical figures, drag.

The show also proves a hefty weight for the three actors, who are on stage for nearly the entire show.

While he had the smallest role in terms of speaking parts, Denver actor Leonard E. Barrett, Jr. made the most impact as Willie, the younger of the two employees.

From the minute he steps onto the stage, Barrett takes over using levity and an impressively natural acting ability to command the stage.

Even when he's just scrubbing the floor (which is what he does most of the show) you can't stop looking over to see what Barrett might do next.

As Sam, the older worker, Earlie Thomas is the more stoic of the two.

Thomas has appeared in only three or so stage shows and it appears he's still working on relaxing on stage. At the beginning, he speaks while looking up as if focusing on not forgetting a line or rushes into the next line too soon.

But once he eases into the role, his performance smooths out. With a few more productions under his belt, Thomas will be an actor to watch.

Another relative newcomer to Bas Bleu, Nathan Young (Hally), also had some awkward moments on stage.

The audience never really gets a feel for what he's going through with his father and Young appears to have some trouble getting into character. It's surprising, as Young was a standout in last season's "Death of a Salesman," which also was directed by Morris Burns.

Known for choosing plays with a strong sense of social or moral commentary, Burns took a risk in choosing such an obscure play.

This time, that risk just misses its mark.
