

“Master Harold” combines racial issues, humor

BY HANNAH MCELROY, CONTRIBUTOR

Published: Mon Feb 09, 2015

With the current protests across the U.S. regarding racial and social divide, this play is just as relevant as ever.

Set in South Africa in the 1950s, “‘Master Harold’ ... and the Boys” focuses on teenager Hally and his two African servants Sam and Willy. During a rainy afternoon in Hally’s mom’s tearoom, the three men confront how race separates them and the years of memories which brought them together.

Walking into the Carousel Theatre, the audience was greeted with music from the ‘50s and a view of the tiny, intimate stage where they were about to meet Hally, Sam and Willy.

The most captivating aspect of the stage was not the old jukebox in the corner or the teapots on the side but the windows with actual water, or rain, coming down behind them. Director Jayne Morgan’s choice to not use fake props helped transport the audience to another time -- especially as Hally enjoyed a real cream soda float, making the entire audience wish they could go to a ‘50s diner after the play.

While the play’s title begins with “Master Harold,” the boys are the real stars of the show. Actors Bryant Bentley (Willy) and Rico Bruce Wade (Sam) steal the audience’s attention right off the bat with their witty banter and comedic delivery of their lines.

Not afraid to make a fool of himself to get a laugh from the audience, Bentley danced around the stage by himself as his character attempted, and failed, to practice the two-step for an upcoming ballroom competition. The ballroom competition, more than just a plot point, represented Willy’s and all the other competitors’ dream of a life that does not include, as Sam said, a place where “we’re bumping into each other all the time.”



• Photo Courtesy of Clarence Brown Theatre

• Photo Courtesy of Clarence Brown Theatre

After many jokes and comedic lines, the play swiftly shifts from a light-hearted comedy to a much more serious social commentary. Though race conflict was a driving force behind the play, it was carefully covered up for the first half of the play by the actors' chemistry with one another, making it seem like they had been friends for years. Being set in the Apartheid, Willy and Sam's race becomes the elephant in the room for the rest of the play until eventually Hally, played by Eric Sorrels, explodes on them.

Sorrels' performance in the last half of the play steals the scene as his character, shaken by the news that his alcoholic father is coming home, makes it clear that he is, was and always will be Willie and Sam's boss before their friend.

The tension the actors create on stage, leaves the audience with a better understanding of the effect of racial divide—then and now.

As the play came to an end and Hally goes home, Willy turns on music and puts out his hand to Sam to dance and simply says "Lets dream."

"'Master Harold'... and the boys" runs until Sunday, Feb. 22.