By Margie Besler

Apartheid has emerged once again as a pressing concern in international affairs, and thus is it most appropriate that South African playwright Athol Fugard's _The Blood Knot_ has been reintroduced to the American stage by Boston's Next Move Theatre Company. The play, first produced in the early sixties, traces the development of the relationship between two half-brothers, one mulatto and one black, as they explore the various emotions each of them associates with race and come to understand just how much stress is placed upon their own blood knot by society's class structures.

Action begins in a slum outside of Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where brothers Zach and Morris Petherson share a hovel while putting away money towards the purchase of a farm. In an attempt to relieve the endless tedium and frustration of their existence, Morris finds a penpal for Zach from an ad in a white newspaper. Ethel, the penpal, is a white woman who expresses a fond desire to meet her black correspondent. Zach, figuring for his life in an encounter with this white girl, encourages his lighter-skinned brother to "pass for white" by dressing up in a fine suit purchased with the money saved for the farm.

Shortly after this, Ethel writes to cancel the meeting explaining that she is engaged. In a fit of depression, Zach asks his brother to dress up and act the part of a white man while he plays against him as a black laborer. The brothers soon become deeply involved in their opposing roles, and nearly reach the point of physical violence, when they are brought back to the reality of their brotherhood by the sound of Morrie's alarm clock, kept to signal the dinner hour and the end of the evening. The play closes as Morris and Zach reaffirm their loyalty to one another in the terrible realization of the destructive forces of deeply ingrained prejudice.

Dramatic action takes play within a highly contained environment, both physically and psychologically, as all scenes occur between the brothers in the shack they inhabit. It is up to Director Suzanne Shepherd's credit that this isolation and restriction of action is not tedious, although her direction does fail to create the sense of smoldering oppression necessary to make this play truly jarring. The work is performed with carefully restrained emotion, as lines are not overplayed, but allowed to take effect simply upon their own strength. Actors Herb Downer and Zach Matalon fully realize the import of the topic they are dealing with, but this consciousness is not allowed to get in the way of acting. Consequently, delivery is simple, unpretentious, and far less declamatory than might be expected in a presentation with such political themes. Downer's and Matalon's work lacks fire until the moment he parades around the stage in a white man's suit.

Performances of _The Blood Knot_ will continue at the Next Move Theatre, next to the Institute for Contemporary Arts, through December 3. This presentation is not all that it could be, yet attendance is worthwhile, for Fugard's play is an affecting commentary on the problem of prejudice.

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