

BROTHERS IN BLOOD

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Religious and racial misunderstanding and intolerance continue to mark the South African experience asserts Mike van Graan's new theatre work.

Mike van Graan's new theatre work takes place against the backdrop of the PAGAD marches in Cape Town during 1999. In the writer's own words, the play: "makes a very simple plea: for human beings, for people in the city to cross religious and racial boundaries". Thus the work is framed from the outset by pedagogical intent; it seeks to make its audience aware of the fractures — political, racial, religious — that persist in South African society, and to force its members into confrontation with their own prejudices vis-à-vis the shadowy spectre of the 'Other'. Each of the five characters embody individual traumas that are mapped onto broader questions of social conflict, their lives intersecting in ways that reveal fault lines of misunderstanding and intolerance that continue to mark the South African experience.

Abubaker Abrahams (a convincing David Dennis) is a Muslim headmaster living with his daughter Leila (vibrantly portrayed by Kim Cloete), in the gangster-ridden Penlyn Estate. Abrahams' hope is to move to a safer neighbourhood, and it is while looking for a house in Sea Point that he is stopped and questioned by Brian Cohen (Murray Todd), a Jewish



Leila and Fadiel
Photo courtesy of the Market Theatre

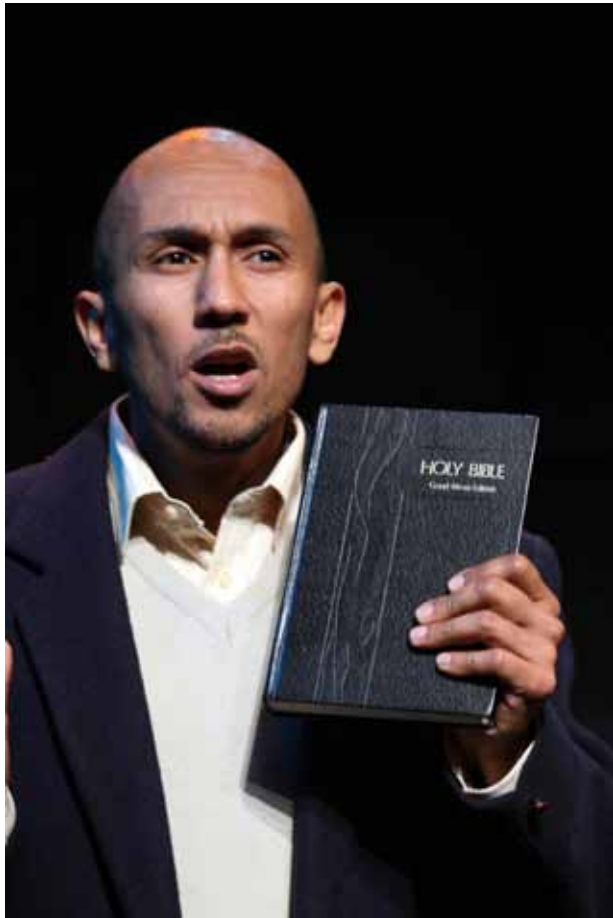
doctor and neighbourhood watch patroller. Interestingly Leila's body, at work and in love, operates as the site through which the other male characters are introduced into the narrative. The polemical Reverend Fredericks (Dale Abrahams) employs her as his secretary after some misgivings about her religious affiliation, while Fadiel Suleiman (well-played by Karabo Kgokong) is a Sudanese refugee with whom she becomes romantically involved. The rendering of the female body as a space of male contestation interlinks with other themes; the interface between religious moralities and notions of secular legality, the location of authority within populist movements and questions of belonging and displacement in a post-apartheid city that remains shaped by segregation and inequality.

Brothers in Blood continues an established tradition in South African theatre that seeks to bring the audience into social and political consciousness, and there are definite traces of the protest theatre of the seventies and eighties in its presentation. The play's formal choices re-engage with some of the questions faced by that particular genre, namely, how can the



Leila and Reverend Fredericks
Photo courtesy of the Market Theatre

aesthetic be utilised in service of the socio-political? From the beginning, the play's form is instrumentalised as message bearer. Director Greg Homann deploys markedly Brechtian techniques in his staging; multi-media images projected onto the back of the set and an invasive, even brutal, soundtrack are clearly intended to force the audience out of passive spectatorship and into engagement. The performances too, register strongly on the level of the didactic. At times this is powerful, at others overstated. Indeed, the urgency of the message means that subtlety of form is sacrificed, and consequently the play is overly schematic, with characters deployed as types of persons locked into social discord rather than as persons in themselves. Granted, the play's objective is to startle rather than to invoke empathy in the viewer, but one leaves the theatre feeling bludgeoned by the spectacle of the performance, rather than moved into recognition of the everyday tragedies and braveries of those for whom it is meant to speak. This is a shame, because *Brothers in Blood* offers several trenchant and persuasive insights into the South African psyche, as well as mo-



Reverend Fredericks

Photo courtesy of the Market Theatre

ments of thoughtfully-rendered encounter between 'Self' and 'Other'.

One has to admire the spirit of activism that inhabits the work, but in writing and producing plays that seek to address the political from the realm of the artistic, one must also ask what new literary modes can be drawn forth from the South African imaginary that are attentive both to the continuing presence of (historical) difference and that gesture

towards a more nuanced understanding of what Achille Mbembe has called, 'the ethics of mutuality'. It is a difficult and challenging question from which to proceed, and one that this reviewer does not presume to answer!