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THEATER REVIEW | 'GROUNDSWELL'

Intersecting Lives Tainted by Apartheid

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

The lives of three disappointed men intersect with volatile consequences in "Groundswell," an engrossing South African play by Ian Bruce that opened on Monday night at the Acorn Theater in a crisply acted production from the New Group.

Set in a guest lodge in a sleepy port town in South Africa, Mr. Bruce's drama could be described as a cross between David Mamet and Athol Fugard. With surprising deftness Mr. Bruce blends consideration of the economic and social fault lines of postapartheid South Africa with a suspense-stoked tale of desperate men willing to go to dangerous lengths to secure one last chance at a big prize.



Ari Mintz for The New York Times From left, David Lansbury, Souléymané Sy Savané and Larry Bryggman in Ian Bruce's "Groundswell," at the Acorn Theater.

The evocative set by Derek McLane, depicting the small dining room and salon of the hotel, is decorated in quaintly tacky seaside gewgaws: starfish affixed to the wall under swaths of netting, plastic seagulls arcing beneath them, beach paintings. The sounds of soft surf and sea bells set the languorous mood.

Thami (Souléymané Sy Savané), the gardener and caretaker during the off season, and Johan (David Lansbury), the odd-job man who lives in a shack across the way, are the only winter staff. A mutual need — and mutual loneliness, perhaps — has inspired them to forge both a friendship and possibly a business partnership.

Thami barely makes enough money to support his wife and children, who live in a dingy shack back in the city he left to make his fortune. Johan is a former policeman and chronic alcoholic who was once jailed for manslaughter and now must scrape a living any way he can. When he's not helping out around the guest lodge, he works as a commercial diver, a dangerous way to earn money that is gradually destroying his health. The director Scott Elliott, an expert at fine-grained naturalism with comic overtones, allows the play's languid pace to accelerate perhaps a little too gingerly. The stretches of well-observed but hardly riveting business — as Johan struggles to remove his beach clothes and, later, as the lodge's lone guest, Smith (Larry Bryggman), idles by himself while waiting for dinner to be served — could be trimmed here and there.

But when the three men settle down at the table, the tension builds quietly but inexorably. Thami and Johan hope to take over a parcel of an abandoned diamond mine that the government is now auctioning off, with special consideration being given to enterprises with black partners. Johan has done a little snooping and has learned that Smith is a retired businessman of some means. The main course being served alongside the crayfish at dinner is the opportunity to invest in their plan. It is not a delicacy that their guest will find easy to decline.

The courtly Smith, a former investment banker who has been forced to retire to make way for younger black candidates, sips his wine and listens politely to Johan's enthusiastic description of this surefire get-rich-quick scheme. But when he registers his skepticism of the government's motives — "Why not fob off the nation's

spent natural resources on the hungry?" he dryly asks — Johan's friendly approach turns more aggressive under the influence of the wine that Thami has expressly forbidden him to drink.

Mr. Bruce draws his characters in admirable depth and telling detail. While each is used to illuminate social or economic problems troubling the country in the years after the dismantling of apartheid, none is merely a place holder for an attitude or a social class. There are a few stagy speeches in which Mr. Bruce brings forth a little too bluntly the issues he wants to engage, but under Mr. Elliott's direction all three actors give layered, effective performances that add nuance to the play's few schematic moments.

The estimable veteran Mr. Bryggman ("Proof") brings a touching sense of emotional exile to his role as the unwillingly retired businessman. Smith's wife died in an accident shortly after he was forced out of banking, and both his daughters live abroad because, as he tartly observes, the opportunities for advancement for whites in South Africa have been sharply curtailed. As the temperature of the evening begins to boil, Mr. Bryggman moves convincingly between contempt, outrage and mortal fear.

Mr. Savané's Thami is a man of fundamental good nature, gentle-spirited and accommodating. But when Johan draws him into a heated discussion of the sins of apartheid and just who should pay for them and how, we see the festering anger and frustration begin to wear away at Thami's probity. That wide, ingratiating smile belies painful grievance.

Strongest of all is Mr. Lansbury, as the seemingly jovial ex-police officer willing to manipulate the weakness of his partner to achieve his ends. Employing an impeccable Afrikaner accent, Mr. Lansbury reveals in small, startling moments the dark currents of rage and bitterness that drive Johan to desperate lengths. Behind the friendly blue eyes and the back-slapping manner is a calculating mind plotting the next move.

And yet Mr. Bruce's writing and Mr. Lansbury's richly felt performance never leave this morally corroded figure's humanity in doubt. In his own way Johan is also a victim of the apartheid years and the political upheavals that followed its dismantling. Almost nobody in the country escaped the taint of that poison.

## GROUNDSWELL

By Ian Bruce; directed by Scott Elliott; sets by Derek McLane; costumes by Eric Becker; lighting by Jason Lyons; sound by Shane Rettig; dialect coach, Stephen Gabis. Presented by the New Group, Mr. Elliott, artistic director; in association with Orin Wolf, David F. Schwartz, Janet Paillet and Jane Dubin.

At the New Group@Theater Row, Acorn Theater, 410 West 42nd Street, Clinton, (212) 279-4200. Through June 27. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

WITH: Larry Bryggman (Smith), David Lansbury (Johan) and Souléymané Sy Savané (Thami).