



New drama at San Jose Rep looks to swell the ground

October 16, 1:14 PM

by David John Chavez



Thami (Dwight Huntsman) and Johan (Scott Coopwood) build a friendship through their shared dream of a better life in San Jose Rep's newest production [Groundswell](#). Photo by Kevin Berne

It was not long ago, April 27th of 1994 to be exact, that South Africa was reborn, with renewed hope, and the belief that the end of apartheid would create new opportunities and unprecedented access to all of its citizens. The day was the first democratic election day in the history of the country, and saw Nelson Mandela as the first president of the new South Africa. It was the Mandela zeitgeist which had the citizens believe that their country was ready to make its progressive way in the world. The dawn of the "rainbow nation" awaited. But little more than 15 years later, South Africa has continued to struggle after coming out of 46 years of racial oppression. Race riots, distressing living conditions and a lack of electricity and clean water have dominated the international headlines.

It is this context that is the backdrop of the gripping and powerful new play from the San Jose Repertory Theatre. [Groundswell](#), written by Ian Bruce and directed by the Rep's former associate artistic director Kirsten Brandt, opens Friday, October 16th. The show was produced Off-Broadway this past summer by New York City's New Group theatre company, and received rave reviews. Brandt is passionate about the material, and is thrilled to be directing a piece that represents what theatre should bring to every society.



Smith (Peter Van Norden) and Johan (Scott Coopwood) enter a precarious business venture. Photo by Kevin Berne

"I really like plays that open doors for dialogue and this is one of them," said Brandt. "I like audiences to think, and challenge their ideas about people and politics."

Set in a guest lodge in a small, beachfront town on the jagged edge of South Africa's diamond coast, the story focuses on the plight of Johan (Scott Coopwood), the odd-job worker living in a shack, and Thami (Dwight Huntsman), the gardener. Their shared dream of a better life has brought them together in friendship. A third man enters the picture, the wealthy businessman Smith (Peter Van Norden), and quickly becomes the target for Johan and Thami's get rich scheme to buy a government-run diamond concession. It is Smith's entrance that fuels the piece, setting forth an examination of the consequences of greed, entitlement and desperation. Each character is that microcosm of how apartheid has affected the different races and classes.



Johan (Scott Coopwood) and Thami (Dwight Huntsman) search for answers as they reach their breaking point. Photo by mellopix.com

When looking at the context of the play, Brandt did not necessarily need to explore a deep and detailed history of apartheid in order to build the show. All she needed to do was to pick up any American newspaper and peek at the headlines.

“You can look at this play in one of two ways – you can look at what’s happening in South Africa, and see the ripples of apartheid that still exist, or you can look at it as more of a universality as far as what is happening in the United States,” said Brandt. “It’s fascinating to do this play at this time. We have people with no healthcare, out of work, losing homes. I have so many friends who have lost jobs. It’s unreal.”

Coopwood could not get enough of the play on his first read, and immediately read it again. It was

the absolute humanness of the characters that drew him into the story. Not long after those initial readings, he knew he unequivocally had to play Johan.

“Johan feels like he has a window of opportunity where he sees a chance for redemption for what he’s done,” said Coopwood. “They are all searching, all desperate, but Johan is probably the most desperate of the three. He doesn’t have the money that Smith has or the family that Thami has. His desperation makes him really charismatic.”



Coopwood, who has built quite a career as a classical actor and features a resume that reads like a Who’s Who of William Shakespeare’s greatest characters, found some amazing challenges in the role, most notably Johan’s accent. An incredibly detail-oriented actor, Coopwood had to dig deep both on a logistic and internal level to harness each need that Johan presents in the 90-plus minute, no intermission production.

“The dialect coach told me that if I can get this accent, then I can get anyone,” said Coopwood. “The role gives me the opportunity to really paint with broad strokes and get very detailed. I get to really experience most of the human condition every night. When the characters get in the room together, there are fireworks. The writer has given us so much.”

EXAMINE IT FOR YOURSELF:

San Jose Repertory Theatre Presents the West Coast premiere of Groundswell

Written by Ian Bruce

Directed by Kirsten Brandt

Starring Scott Coopwood, Dwight Huntsman and Peter Van Norden

Oct. 16th – Nov. 8th, dark Mondays

The Rep is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA 95113

For tickets, go to www.sjrep.com or call (408) 367-7255

Email David John Chavez at dchavez04@att.net