

Review: 'Groundswell' teems with tension

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Groundswell: Drama. By Ian Bruce. Directed by Kirsten Brandt. With Scott Coopwood, Dwight Huntsman and Peter Van Norden. Through Nov. 8. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. One hour, 40 minutes. Tickets: \$17.50-\$64. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.



Kevin Berne

The tension is so thick, you could cut it with a knife - particularly that nasty-looking blade wielded with such a scary combination of lethal skill and drunken carelessness by Scott Coopwood. In the West Coast premiere of Ian Bruce's "Groundswell" at San Jose Repertory Theatre, the combination of South Africa's still-brutal legacy of apartheid with diamonds, poverty and alcohol makes for a combustible situation.

Coopwood incorporates every ounce of that expectation of menace from the moment his white ex-cop Johan bursts into the sedate lobby of John Iacovelli's expertly appointed beachside resort set. Lean, muscular and grinning with lupine rapacity, he's so overflowing with suspicious exuberance that he can't sit still without running in place. The friendly but cautious determination with which Dwight Huntsman, as the black gardener Thami who manages the

place during the off-season, tries to get rid of Johan gradually notches up the tension.

It still takes awhile for the suspense to set in, despite the deft strokes with which Huntsman and Coopwood lay its foundations in director Kirsten Brandt's handsome production. The background of the plot is complicated enough that, combined with all we need to absorb about post-apartheid South African politics and economics, the expository material runs pretty thick at first.

But it's worth it. What we learn about diamond scavengers and thieves and evolving racial tensions in the playwright's native land is endlessly intriguing and Bruce, for the most part, has embedded the key elements skillfully in his characters and plot.

Johan and Thami hope to get rich by purchasing a government-subsidized alluvial diamond mining claim on a nearby river, but haven't been able to raise the down payment. Thami needs the money to finally rescue his wife and children from urban township squalor. Johan, an ex-con who was fired from the police force for manslaughter, has ulterior psychological motives behind his desperate need to help his only friend.

The arrival of Smith (Peter Van Norden), an unexpected and obviously wealthy overnight guest, injects urgency into the situation. A white former anti-apartheid liberal and banker - embittered by the loss of his job, his wife's death and his grown children's exodus from the country - Smith has no interest in investing in their scheme. What starts as a business proposal turns ominously ugly and enlightening at the same time.

It could be even denser. Van Norden's stolid Smith is slow to sense danger, though he traces a sharp portrait of some of the complexities of South African racial politics. But Coopwood and Huntsman build the plot from a simmer to a boil by carefully calculated degrees, as Brandt cagily turns up the heat to the slow, steady knell of coastal fog-warning bells in Steve Schoenbeck's sound design. And when Smith tunes in, Van Norden makes his resentment as essential and illuminating an element as his fear.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com.

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