

**GROUNDSWELL AT SAN JOSE REP IS A STUNNER**



(l to r) Thami (Dwight Huntsman) and Johan (Scott Coopwood) explain their diamond concession idea to (center) Smith (Peter Van Norden) in San Jose Rep’s West Coast premiere of *Groundswell*. Photo: Kevin Berne

*GROUNDSWELL*, written by Ian Bruce, directed by Kirsten Brandt. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA 95113-2603 or [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com). **October 10 - November 8, 2009**

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South African playwright Ian Bruce lived in exile for his activism has returned to his native land to write about the country in the post apartheid years. *Groundswell* premiered in South Africa in 2005 and off Broadway this past summer where it received rave reviews. San Jose Rep has come up with a stunning production for its second staging in the U.S.A. that will keep you engrossed during the entire 90-minute performance. As an added benefit, the spectacular set alone is worth the price of admission.

The setting is a beachfront guest lodge in the South African diamond coast that is no longer mined by the big conglomerates. Yet, many, mostly blacks, attempt to scratch a living searching for alluvial diamonds that have washed down the local river and into the sea. It is a foggy wintry day in the lodge’s off-season with a far off bell that intermittently tolls to warn approaching ships. We gradually learn for whom that bell tolls. It tolls for all three of the diverse/dynamic characters whom Bruce has deftly woven into a suspenseful story line that underlines the effects on whites as well as blacks in the recently post-apartheid society.

Thami ( Dwight Huntsman) the black caretaker and Johan (Scott Coopwood) a white ex-cop who had been imprisoned for shooting a black live on the lodge. Johan has been partially disabled from the effects of bends from his job as a commercial deep sea diver searching for off shore diamonds. He works as a handyman. There is a strong friendship between the two as they both cast about for diamonds that will make them rich leading to an idyllic life for themselves and Thami’s family. They scheme to buy a government-run diamond concession and are vainly waiting for Johan to “win the lottery” to provide the needed money for the purpose. When Smith (Peter Van Norden), a disillusioned wealthy businessman who has been forced from his position to make room for an unqualified black arrives, the two desparate men see him as the investor they are seeking for their iffy get-rich scheme.

All are disappointed with the present state of affairs and the lives of these three men intersect with volatile consequences. Bruce dramatically explores the questions, without answers, of how are both white and black to live together. Who bears the responsibility for the transgressions of the past and what does the future hold? Bruce has given almost equal credibility for justifications for their actions. The writing, acting and direction will keep your eyes glued to the stage even when Bruce allows his characters to moralize their positions. Even the

static expository moments dove- tail with the horrendous physical action. There is an axiom in the theatre that if a gun appears in the first act, it will reappear in the second act. A knife appears in the opening scenes and it's use later is a harrowing experience.

Dwight Hunstman as good-natured Thami with a wide smile is refreshing but the transition to expressing festering anger lacks depth. While Scott Coopwood as Johan gives a gut wrenching performance, he defines his role with high-level energy that would benefit with a nuanced progression making his final exit palatable. It is seasoned actor Peter Van Norden as Smith who gives a layered performance shifting from indifference to outrage and mortal fear. Disregard the minor caveats because this is a not to be missed production. New Artistic Director Rick Lombardo has come up with two winners in a row.

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