



Side project theatre company

reviews

thief river

WINDY CITY TIMES - FEBRUARY 28, 2007

By Rick Reed

If the emotions experienced by audiences are even half as powerful as those of the Pulitzer- and Tony-nominated playwright and local director of *Thief River*, viewers are in for a memorable, and perhaps gut-wrenching, experience. *Thief River*, the side project theater company's first gay-themed play, will run through March 25.

Thief River tells the story of Gil and Ray through three eras: the late 1940s, early 1970s and the present. Director Jarrett Dapier calls the pair "two almost painfully anonymous men," and says the play is structured in such a way as to relay what choices led them to their hurt, haunted and lonely conditions. "The convention [playwright Lee] Blessing uses to tell this story is poetic, disarming and compelling," he said. "Each scene is fractured by new scenes in different time periods, fragments from letters [and] direct audience addresses, all showing us how Gil and Ray piece their own story together in their heads."

People will inevitably draw comparisons between *Thief River* and *Brokeback Mountain*, Annie Proulx's short story that was later developed into an Ang Lee film. Blessing says of the similarities: "I was unaware of Annie Proulx's story when I wrote *Thief River* in 2000. They're just coincidental tales on generally the same theme. My guys wear farmer hats and her guys wear cowboy hats. ... And neither was written by a gay man; perhaps that's one of the most important similarities. Gay male themes are becoming of interest to a broader spectrum of writers."

Blessing says the origins of the play go back some 17 years before it was even written. "I'd created a different [now defunct] script about a heterosexual couple that used the same 50-year relationship, three-age-pairings-of-actors theatrical concept. That show didn't work as a love story, mostly because the obstacles weren't large enough. When I made the couple gay, it transformed the idea into something with vastly more relevance—especially considering the 50 years involved, roughly 1950-2000."

Dapier says he was drawn to the material because "I am drawn to plays in which characters are intelligent and have very deep emotional needs, but are unable to achieve those needs because of the personal, social, political, and cultural forces dictating their lives and senses of identity. Blessing has written a deeply felt, extensively thought-through play that illustrates completely how cultural attitudes and biases towards homosexuals have affected, wrecked and held back the lives of average Americans, particularly Midwestern[ers], in the last 55 years."

Dapier had no qualms about labeling the play as "gay-themed." In fact, he said, "If *Angels in America* is the consummate/paramount/definitive work about the experience of New York homosexuals in the political, cultural, and religious moment of the Reagan '80s, then *Thief River* is the definitive work capturing the homosexual experience in the rural American Midwest over the last 50 years."

Both Dapier and Blessing have specific hopes for what audiences would take away from their viewings of the play. For Dapier, it was about identification and education. For Blessing, there's a hope that the universal message of love comes through. "As with any other love story, I hope they'll exit with an enhanced sense of how difficult real love is to hold on to, even in the best of circumstances."



NEW CITY - MARCH 7, 2007

By Fabrizio Almeida

Playwright Lee Blessing has something to say about loneliness in “Thief River,” a Chicago premiere production courtesy of the side project: “We’re born alone. We die alone. And every moment in between is an opportunity not to be alone.” It’s a sweetly lyrical if sentimental line, adjectives that might have described his entire play had he not misguidedly concerned himself more with the mechanics of storytelling than with the psychology of its storytellers.

“Thief River” is a multi-generational memory play that tells of the clandestine and mostly painful love affair between two men spanning fifty years. It comments on the changing attitudes towards homosexuality in rural America, the homophobia that ultimately claims the men’s relationship and features three different pairs of actors portraying the couple at different times in history: the 1950s, the 1970s and today. As such, time here is always in flux – lurching forward by decades, flashing back briefly a few years or freezing to deliver an elliptical monologue. And yet, the play never bothers to dramatize scenes that might hint at why these young men came together in the first place, let alone satisfactorily explain what keeps them connected throughout the years (the play’s sometimes unnecessarily confusing chronology doesn’t help matters). Reductive reasoning such as fear of loneliness or lack of other available gay bachelors betrays the potential complexity of these characters, lessens what little dramatic stakes there are, and ultimately makes for an emotionally unsatisfying experience, especially when compared to that thematically similar cinematic masterpiece, “Brokeback Mountain.”

At least the side project’s beautifully-observed production has been strongly cast with an ensemble capable of playing the spontaneity of a moment without losing sight of their characters’ overall emotional arcs. And director Jarrett Dapier has helmed with remarkable sensitivity imbuing the production with an intimacy and poignancy not always found in the writing.

TIMEOUT CHICAGO - MARCH 6, 2007

By Novid Parsi

In “Glen’s Homophobia Newsletter Vol. 3, No. 2,” David Sedaris’ titular scribe hilariously saw the slightest slight against him as prompted by homophobia; with the big H obscuring his vision, he hardly perceived anything else. Glen comes to mind while taking in Blessing’s earnest, well-meaning 2001 drama about country boys Gil and Ray, with three pairs of actors playing them at ages 18, 43 and 71. In short, Gil is Jack to Ray’s Ennis. The message-play’s message: Midcentury small-town, small-minded rejection of homosexuality caused lifelong frustration and unhappiness. Representing these lives’ full spectrums through a time-crossing structure has potential poignancy, but rather than unfolding as unexpectedly as real life, Gil and Ray fold up neatly into shapes the author has predesigned.

Most lines, or so it seems, pertain to homosexuality, with characters falling into one of two camps: hostile or tolerant. Harlow, the vagabond who comes upon the boys in the barn: homophobe; Ray’s grandpa, who saves them from Harlow only to tear them asunder: homophobe. Ditto for Ray’s son and Harlow’s relative, while Ray’s grandson graduates to tolerance. It isn’t that such attitudes aren’t in themselves credible, but that Blessing’s programmatic writing (Gil follows the urban path: young lover, AIDS-stricken friends; Ray sticks to the country road: wife, kid) reduces people to agendas. Dapier easefully handles the material, yet aside from John Ruhaak as the oldest Ray, the actors don’t fully convince as small-town folks, or as folks. As poor Glen never learns, even homophobes take time for other pursuits.



WINDY CITY TIMES - MARCH 3, 2007

By Mary Shen Barnidge

Comparisons to “Brokeback Mountain” are inevitable, but while Annie Proulx opted for the soft-focus nostalgia of 19th-century romances, Lee Blessing sets his chronicle within our own experience, ending it in an uneasy, but nevertheless, satisfying compromise far more plausible to modern audiences than the artificial catharses of standard-issue Romeo-and-Romeo yarns.

Our story begins in 1948, with two teenage boys in rural Minnesota united in their “special” sexual proclivities, but divided over what to do about them. Gil wants to leave their repressive environment behind forever, but Ray—the sole heir in a clan beset by untimely misfortune—is hesitant to abjure his responsibilities. Violent circumstances force them to part ways until 1973. Gil is now gay-and-proud with his trophy fancy-boy, but Ray has honored his obligations to continue the family name and, with them, his duty to his wife and children. After a crisis again separates the comrades, several more decades pass before they meet again to settle their debts—to one another, and to those many others figuring in their destinies.

A universe in which external obstacles to true love are granted genuine value demanding valid consideration is what distinguishes Blessing’s intelligent approach to his topic. Even as we champion Gil’s quest for individual freedom, we recognize the inherent selfishness of his indifference to the collateral damage he engenders. And if we sneer at Ray for his acquiescence to conventional appearances, the moral convictions that make him determined to do right by EVERYONE, even his former enemies, however great his personal sacrifice, ultimately commands our respect and sympathies.

You might think that Blessing’s mosaic narration and minimal personnel—six actors playing twelve roles—would make for confusion. But though a slight lag in orientation time was evident during the early expository scenes at the preview performance I attended, so sharply delineated are the personalities invoked by the ensemble of Mike Harvey, Nick Lewis, Kipp Moorman, Paul Quaintance, John Ruhaak and Jim Schmid (under the direction of Jarrett Dapier) that we quickly adjust to the author’s presentational devices. (Jennifer Zielinski’s costume design also helps, each character’s clothes literally making the man.) Playgoers appreciative of a gay-themed play NOT requiring them to bring spare hankies should be amply rewarded at the side project’s tiny Rogers Park storefront.

CHICAGO READER - MARCH 9, 2007

Thief River, Lee Blessing’s drama about a 60-year relationship, reminds us that before there was Boystown, there were just boys in towns.

By Albert Williams

Ann Coulter made headlines last week with a snide comment at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, D.C. – at once an attempt to smear Democratic presidential contender John Edwards and a jab at so-called political correctness. “It turns out you have to go into rehab if you use the word faggot,” she said. “So I – so kind of an impasse, can’t really talk about Edwards.” Her comment – an allusion to Grey’s Anatomy star Isaiah Washington getting therapy after tossing the slur at a fellow actor – provoked howls of outrage. But it’s hard to imagine the cynical denizens of D.C. actually being offended. Indeed, the Edwards campaign site quickly began playing Coulter’s speech as a fund-raising gimmick, thereby giving the epithet even wider circulation.



What these players of power politics don't seem to understand is that when one celebrity calls another a faggot, the hateful message filters down to real people in real-life America. Things get a little more miserable and confusing for kids wrestling with their sexuality. For every out-and-proud Ellen DeGeneres or Neil Patrick Harris there's a Tim Hardaway proclaiming that homosexuality "shouldn't be in the world" or a self-hating Ted Haggard declaring himself "completely heterosexual" after three weeks of counseling. The invisibility that once cloaked "the love that dare not speak its name" has been replaced by an openness unthinkable half a century ago – but increased public awareness has by no means led to universal respect.

Jumping back and forth in time, Lee Blessing's *Thief River* chronicles a 60-year relationship whose evolution mirrors modern gay history. Written with a rustic lyricism that recalls the poetry of Robert Frost, this engrossing character study-cum-murder mystery focuses on Gil and Ray, two guys from a Minnesota farming community whose friendship shifts into romance "one confession at a time," as Ray puts it. When a traumatic incident separates the lovers, each is forced to weigh his feelings for the other against social expectations and his own values – family ties for Ray, emotional honesty for Gil. Blessing's 2001 drama reveals lives shaped by what might have been as well as what was – what time, the thief, steals from us as time, the river, carries us on. The subject of a long-term, rural same-sex relationship calls to mind *Brokeback Mountain*, of course; I also thought of Gore Vidal's novel *The City and the Pillar*, which shocked readers in the 1940s with its depiction of a seemingly typical small-town all-American boy obsessed by a sexual encounter he had with a high school buddy.

In *Thief River*, Gil and Ray are seen as teenagers in 1948, as middle-aged guys in 1973, and as old men today. Theirs is an enduring love but not a happy one: they spend most of the years geographically separated and emotionally estranged. When revelation of their affair leads to a homicide, Gil leaves town while Ray stays to take care of the family farm, marry, and raise a family. The two meet again 25 years later when Gil – a leisure-suited urbanite with a cute, much younger boyfriend – returns for the wedding of Ray's son. It's the first flowering of gay pride, and even skeptical straight folks are willing to be tolerant. But as one character notes, "You don't have to like what you tolerate. That's what toleration's for." Which is why Ray chooses to stay in the closet.

An odd burial ceremony is the occasion of the couple's final encounter. By now each man has made an imperfect peace with himself. Ray's belated coming-out has led his son to reject him, but his grandson casually accepts having a gay granddad. Gil, torn between his affection for Ray and resentment that his onetime lover turned him away, has grown weary of losing friends and lovers to AIDS and old age.

Thief River requires three pairs of actors for the two leads at different ages, and the play's unusual narrative structure – which alternates dialogue and monologues in scenes that criss-cross over the years – demands performances of unrelenting honesty to ensure the story's credibility. Director Jarrett Dapier's superb cast rises to the challenge in Side Project's Chicago premiere. Gangly Nick Lewis and stocky Mike Harvey are the teenage Gil and Ray; Paul Quaintance and Kipp Moorman portray their 1970s counterparts; and Jim Schmid and John Ruhaak are wonderful as the old men. It's rare to find one good elderly actor in an off-Loop non-Equity show, let alone two; Schmid and Ruhaak's performances resonate with hard-earned wisdom. All six cast members double in supporting roles, deftly altering their voices and demeanor and making lightning-fast costume changes. Grant Sabin's ingenious set enhances the acting's intimacy and authenticity by transforming the theater – stage and seating area alike – into a cramped shed, with the audience perched on mismatched, beat-up wood chairs of the sort you might find in an old outbuilding.

Even in its most intense moments of loving intimacy and brutal violence, *Thief River* is devoid of sentimentality, melodrama, and political grandstanding as it asks us to consider how its characters' lives – and by extension our own – are shaped by the conflicting values of changing times.



CHICAGO FREE PRESS - FEBRUARY 28, 2007

By Brian Kirst

While comparisons to “Brokeback Mountain” are inevitable, Lee Blessing’s heart-stirring “Thief River” was written in 2002, several years before the Academy Award-nominated film’s debut.

Blessing’s memory-strewn piece focuses on one male couple’s inability to commit to each other throughout many decades. This side project Chicago premiere is a poetic, transporting production. You can almost hear the whistling of the lonesome country wind between the pauses in the actor’s lines.

Chronicling the love affair between the two young farm boys, “Thief River” begins in the 1940’s. Two teenagers, Ray and Gil, are torn apart after a night of passion and violence. Years later, Ray, resigned to a small-town straight existence, continues to communicate with the openly gay Gil through weekly letters. The pair meet again in the early 1970s as middle aged men and then as senior citizens in present day.

Three pairs of excellent actors portray Ray and Gil throughout the ages. Each also portrays an additional significant character in the proceedings. Despite Jarret Dapier’s concise direction and targeted lighting cues, this does get a bit confusing at times. There is much decade-hopping in this non-linear piece and it is sometimes difficult, as scenes first begin, to tell who is who.

Blessing also throws in as much mysterious intrigue and bloody retribution as a minor Shakespearian drama. For a 90-minute one-act, the plot occurrences almost strain credibility. Still, Dapier and cast draw you in with their intimate focus and you find yourself believing everything that occurs.

As the eldest Gil and Ray, Jim Schmid and John Ruhaak, bring a seasoned honesty and honed likeability to the stage. Nick Lewis as the youngest Gil and Ray’s young grandson, gives the twisted confusion of youth a beating, present heart. Kipp Moorman, as the middle-aged Ray, convinces with an awkward realism and confusion. Of the six, though, Mike Harvey and Paul Quaintance deserve special note. Their two characters range from the painfully honest to the emotionally extreme and the two never hit a false note. Harvey particularly resonates with the promise of many brilliant performances to come.

Ultimately Dapier and his crew pull at your senses. They fill you with the beauty and echoing loneliness that is part and parcel of the rural existence and unfulfilled love. It is a journey well worth taking.



CHICAGO TRIBUNE - MARCH 16, 2007

By Kerry Reid

If Lee Blessing's play "Thief River," about two gay men in Minnesota, had focused only on the tragic toll of homophobia in rural communities, it would still be a welcome addition to the body of work about gay life out of big cities (see also "Brokeback Mountain" and the 2004 play "Arrangement for Two Violas" by local writer Susan Lieberman).

But though Blessing's primary tale concerns the inability of Gil and Ray to form a bond against the odds of community and familial hatred, there also is an underpinning of keen loss and disconnection threaded through the fabric of the story.

The play opens with the bloodied figure of Gil, victim of a gay bashing at his high school prom in 1948, cowering in an empty house on Ray's farm. The house will be the setting for all the action of the play as it zigzags back and forth over 50 years, but it isn't merely abandoned; it's haunted by violence. This is where Ray's war vet father, suffering "battle fatigue," killed his wife and himself. It will soon become the scene for another murder – and as that crime unravels it helps unite the three eras of the play, from that unhappy prom night to a disastrous wedding of closeted Ray's son in 1973 to the present. Along the way, the specters of AIDS and farm foreclosures serve as offstage reminders of the gaping chasm between Gil and Ray's boyhood romance and the stunted reality of their subsequent lives.

Jarrett Dapier's adept staging for Side Project, a local premiere, is blessed with a strong cast of six who each play two roles, moving confidently between characters and eras. A taut 90 minutes sans intermission, Blessing's story packs a lot into its understated language, even if it doesn't completely avoid stereotypes. Gil's much-younger boyfriend in the 1973 segments seems too over-the-top, for instance, but Blessing does manage to depict the rural mind-set without completely demonizing farm folk.

What really gives this surprisingly uplifting tale its heart is the careful way Dapier and his cast capture what Ray calls "the emotional sign language" by which Ray and Gil communicate during their brief interludes as they fall in love "one confession at a time."