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The Lost Boys of Sudan

(Children's Theater Company, Minneapolis; 260 seats; \$28 top) MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. A Children's Theater Company presentation of a play in two acts by Lonnie Carter. Directed by Peter C. Brosius.

T-Mac Sam - Samuel G. Roberson Jr.

A.I. Josh - Andre Samples

K-Gar Ollie - Namir Smallwood

Moira Midnight - Annie Enneking

Tim Rummy - Connor Flanagan

Copernicus, Clayton Powell,

Kookoorooku - Shawn Hamilton

Molly Midnight - Nadia Hulett

Ayoun, K-Gar's Mother,

Nyandier - Marvette Knight

Twelve, Miriam Maker - Sonja Parks

Christian Warlord,

Crispus Attucks - Ashford J. Thomas

By QUINTON SKINNER

Civil war in Sudan has displaced an estimated 6 million people, including 20,000 boys orphaned and left to find their fate amid a perilous landscape. Writer Lonnie Carter and director Peter C. Brosius take on this contemporary tragedy for the Children's Theater Company of Minneapolis in "The Lost Boys of Sudan," a work of deep passion but decidedly mixed overall results.

The play revolves around three boys from the same tribe. T-Mac (Samuel G. Roberson Jr.), A.I. (Andre Samples) and K-Gar (Namir Smallwood) are on the cusp of manhood in their pastoral milieu when war erupts into their life -- quite literally, in the form of rapid-fire vignettes punctuated by percussion, portraying harshly stylized violence and desperation.

The boys are put through their paces, shot at, conscripted and at one point forced to work in the oil industry. (Carter, who injects an ironic musical sense throughout the piece, has the Lost Boys performing an involuntary work song to the tune of "Dixie.") As the first act intensifies, Geoff Korf's dynamic lighting design lends the work the frenetic visuals of an action-adventure, with the young men crossing a rope bridge as crocodiles snap at

their feet, then finally climbing a ladder to an uncertain future after a stint in a refugee camp.

The thesps playing the titular boys are uniformly sympathetic and purposeful in their work. Smallwood has an elastic-limbed, sly, look-at-me quality, while also stretching in later passages to demonstrate hollow-eyed shock. Samples has a big, expressive face and carves out his character as an able survivor, while Roberson gives us the younger T-Mac as guileless as game.

Similarly, the veteran ensemble tackles a passel of roles with complete precision. If only the second act stood up to the promise of the first. Before intermission, this show plays like a theatrical missile, propelling three brave young souls while also stretching an exceptional larger cast through challenges both emotional and physical. Yet in act two, when the Lost Boys are transported to Fargo, N.D., things begin to fizzle.

The opening scene, in which the boys struggle with their thermostat and nearly bake themselves in their apartment, is funny, humane and believable. After that, though, the action breaks down into a series of tepid vignettes that hint at great transformation but never quite deliver. Carter, whose affection for his lead characters is amply evident, fails to find the sort of revealing detail in the heartland setting that would enable us to feel our young survivors' process of adjustment and precisely how their past and present come together.

Part of the blame lies with the playwright's stylized approach; in much of the second act, the dialogue is delivered in rhyming couplets. Carter's intent is clear, giving us an outsider's view of America's psychic music as a cross between the heights of epic poetry and the depths of the ad jingle. But the ironic distance generated is too great, and the action lacks any pivotal event or conflict around which the audience might attach its own passions.

This theater piece is ostensibly aimed at a teen audience, although its ambitions are astronomical. Its courage in tackling real-time tragedy with little sentimentality, and its smartly ambiguous tone, are both laudable. If something fails to come across in the telling of this story, that ultimately boils down to how astonishingly difficult it is to understand, much less come to terms, with the events being depicted.

Carter and Brosius have created an important if flawed work that deals with bravery in the face of the greatest extremities of human existence. Any criticism of their execution will probably fade long before the realities of the story they tell.

Sets, Debra Booth; costumes, Helen Q. Huang; lighting, Geoff Korf; original music and sound, Andre Pluess; choreography, Uri Sands; dialect coach, Elisa Carlson; production stage manager, Jenny R. Friend. Opened, reviewed March 30, 2007. Running time: 2 HOURS.