'Pinholes of Light' and 'Men of Stone': A Review of Dionne Brand's First Play, *thirsty*

By Stephanie McKenzie

**thirsty** (by Dionne Brand; adapted from her book of poetry *thirsty*)

Trinidadian-born Toronto writer and former Toronto Poet Laureate Dionne Brand brought her first play, an adaptation of her poetry collection *thirsty* (2002), to the stage of the NAC studio, National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Canada, Nov 5-17. It was directed by Peter Hinten and featured the NAC English Theatre Company, with actors Carol Ceece Anderson (Girl), Andrew Dwyer (Julia), Andrew Moodie (Alan) and Jackie Richardson (Chloe).

Brand is a renowned poet, novelist, and essayist. Her collections of poetry include *Land to Light On* (1997), winner of the Governor General’s Award and the Trillium Book Award; and *Inventory* (2006), a finalist for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award and the Governor General’s Award. Dissuas, her most recent book of poetry, won the 2011 Griffin Poetry Prize.

**thirsty** was winner of the Pat Lowther Memorial Award and a finalist for the Trillium Book Award, the Toronto Book Award, and the Griffin Poetry Prize. In 2006 it was among the prestigious Harbourfront Festival Prize, and, in 2008, she was named Toronto’s third Poet Laureate.

**thirsty** is the story of a family — Alan, his wife, Julia, their child, known only as Girl, and Chloe, Alan’s mother — who have moved from Jamaica to Toronto. Julia, a lab assistant in a hospital, has been in Toronto (where she migrated for work) since 1970, and, in 1974, with the help of Julia’s savings, Alan joins her. In turn, they work and save and, in 1976, send for Girl (13 years old) and Chloe, who join them in their-filled with all kinds of stuff — apartment. Alan, a “prophet,” as he sees himself, and an aspiring preacher, suffers from severe mental illness, and the audience witnesses him growing increasingly unhinged throughout the course of the play, which moves between different time periods: 1982 and back through 1974-8. Alan is dead at the play’s beginning, though his words, you can do, / as hereditary as thirst” — and clearly as its stage version.

Their small apartment is in such a state? Girl has, indeed, promised him that he will close by near the play’s end.

Alan arrives in Toronto. “I missed you like water,” he tells his wife, overcome with emotion. Notably his situation utterly hopeless?

Alan cannot be held accountable for his own demise (as Leap perhaps can), but when Chloe lets us know that the officer who shot him was not charged, we realize the gods are ‘men of stone.’

At the play’s end, Girl will, however, mount a truck. The reason? He’s black. Any black man who trucks the police, and though he bears only one boot, a metaphor for the trouble he will have ensuring people don’t smoke in the bathroom.

At the play’s end, Girl will, however, mount a truck. Though all actors are strong, Jackie Richardson (as Chloe) gifted with undying affection, Alan mesmerising in his ability to "dreams are anything but simple," yet Girl aims to dream still.

"One day I will record the tenses of light," says Chloe, quoting text verbatim from Brand’s poetry collection, though, as she also says, “not now.” For as the play closes, she notes, as thirty’s narrator does, that “in the city there is no simple love or fidelity . . . . / nights insomniac with phobias of light.” Though all actors are strong, Audrey Dwyer (as Julia) convincing in her troubled and faithful love for Alan, Jackie Richardson (as Chloe) gifted with stage presence and a choice pick for a mother desperate with undoing affectation, Alan mesmerising in his ability to move between states, it is Carol Ceece Anderson, as Girl, who stands out with her uncanny ability to both play a child and represent woman’s strength.

Unfortunately, there are no tour plans at present for this play, though Brand’s poetry and drama would stand strong on all stages, Jamaica’s included.

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**Review:**

The opening scene set the story behind the long poem. Alan, a full-fledged character now, is given a voice. He is the protagonist, his words, taken from Brand’s poetry, opening the play — "I don’t remember that frail morning . . . falling is all you can do, / as hereditary as thirst" — and reminding us of his dying word, “thirsty.” The play, through stylised shifts, then turns to the moment Alan arrives in Toronto. “I missed you like water,” he tells his wife, overcome with emotion. Notably, and though Alan has freshly arrived from Jamaica, there is no Jamaican Creole or Jamaican accents, a wise choice as a forced attempt to represent Jamaican language would have reduced the play and its poetry. Time moves to 1978 when Girl and Julia reuni...