

REVIEW

'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*)
World Premiere (Nov 5 - 17)
National Arts Centre English Theatre
NAC Studio
Ottawa, Canada

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 Theatre, Ottawa, Canada, Nov 5-17. It was directed by Peter Hinton and featured the NAC English Theatre Company, with actors Carol Cece Anderson (Girl), Audrey Dwyer (Julia), Andrew Moodie (Alan) and Jackie Richardson (Chloe).

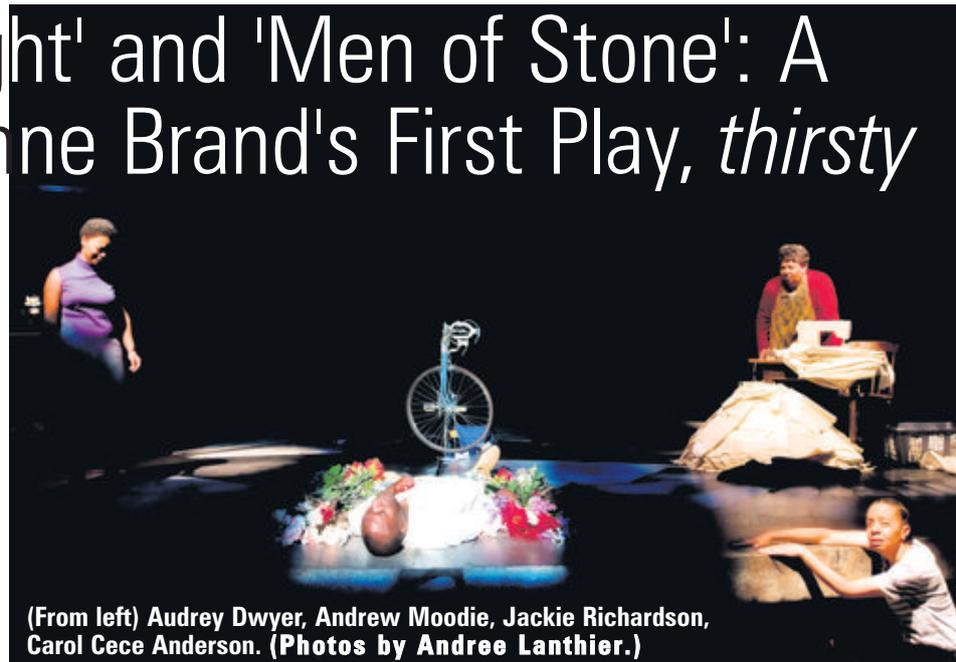
Brand is a renowned poet, novelist, and essayist. Her collections of poetry include *Land to Light On* (1997), winner of the Governor General's Award and the Trillium Book Award; and *Inventory* (2006), a finalist for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award and the Governor General's Award. *Ossuaries*, her most 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, Brand was awarded the prestigious Harbourfront Festival Prize, and, in 2009, she was named Toronto's third Poet Laureate.

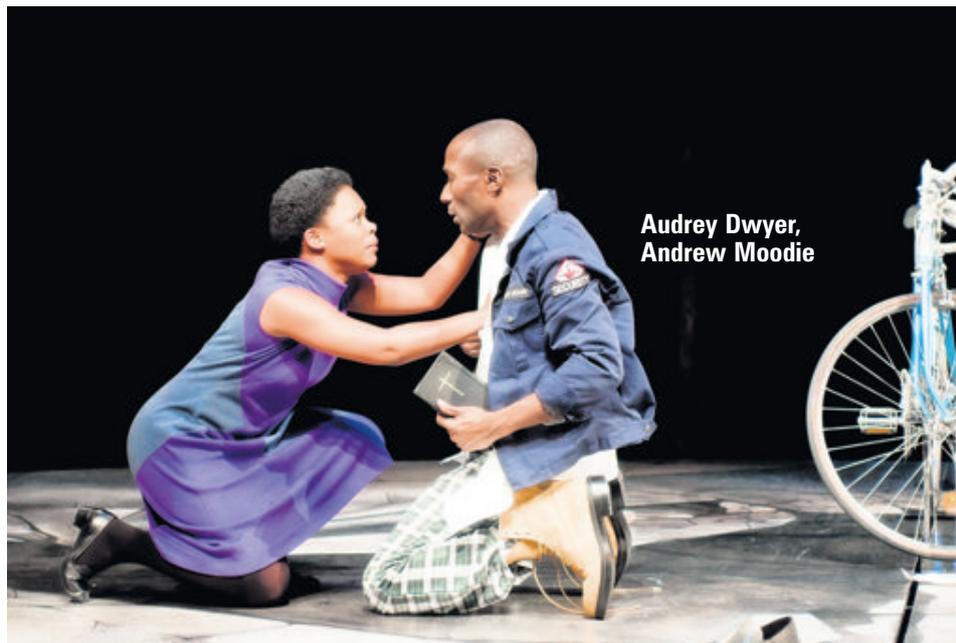
thirsty is the story of a family — Alan, his wife, Julia, their child, known only as Girl, and Chloe, Alan's mother — who have moved from Jamaica to Toronto. Julia, a lab assistant in a hospital, has been in Toronto (where she migrated for work) since 1970, and, in 1974, with the help of Julia's savings, Alan joins her. In turn, they work and save and, in 1976, send for Girl (13 years old) and Chloe, who join them. They all live together in one apartment. Alan, a "prophet," as he sees himself, and an aspiring preacher, suffers from severe mental illness, and the audience witnesses him growing increasingly sick 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 *thirsty* resurrects the story's ultimate tragedy. In 1978, while he is in a state of deep psychosis, Girl phones the police, and though he bears only hedge-clippers when they arrive at his house, they shoot him dead. The play is about much more than mental illness — it is about how hard Canada can be, especially for people who are immigrants and aren't white. As Brand noted in correspondence, "The characters are really a composite of a time in the late-70s/80s in Toronto/Montreal when there were numerous police killings of black men. These days they are carding every Black kid."

Appropriate sounds frame the play's opening: the snapping of photos as Julia, Chloe and Girl are frozen in a state of shock; the sound of dripping water; and sirens. Poetry then introduces the play, each character performing memorable excerpts from *thirsty*; this beginning prompts a pattern where Brand's poetic text will be placed at crucial times in characters' mouths, though her poetry collection does not distinguish characters as clearly as its stage version. *thirsty* will close by near return, the next thing we see being the traumatic moment of Alan's death, that violent act occurring again near the play's end.

On stage, *thirsty* enacts 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,



(From left) Audrey Dwyer, Andrew Moodie, Jackie Richardson, Carol Cece Anderson. (Photos by Andree Lanthier.)



Audrey Dwyer, Andrew Moodie

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 1976 when Girl and Julia reunite with joy, fear and trepidation. Their family has been torn apart by the economics into which they were born. Tellingly, Alan, upon his arrival, has been promised construction work by Donovan (originally from Ochi, his wife from Trelawny), and Julia presents him with a brand new pair of work boots. Alan struggles with the first boot, a metaphor for the trouble he will have adjusting to Toronto and his new work. And he will never adjust.

We hear Alan recount a story to Julia about the police who chased him as he ran to catch the work truck. The reason? He's black. Any black man who runs in this city is a potential criminal. Alan will come to claim that Canada is "irredeemable," since "you're behind all the time." Early on, Julia will say to Alan, "this place is different; back home was too small for you", but when we see her husband ripped from her, Chloe's words haunt: "This country spoils people's lives." Though Chloe has the least lines of any, her presence is powerful. She sits in front of a sewing machine through almost the entire show with an impossible heap of mending and work piled high in front of her which emphasises the drudgery of domestic, underpaid labour. Economic inequity is underscored further when Julia, trying to defend herself to Alan, who is resentful that they have been apart, makes it clear that she has "lived with only one dress on her back for a long time". Alan switches jobs throughout the play, at one point becoming a security guard, his exasperation with menial labour growing when he

notes the purpose of his job and life now is to ensure people don't smoke in the bathroom.

His main source of exasperation, though, is that he has been forbidden to preach in the Restitution Church, for preaching is his first love. So he performs sermons outside at Christie Pits, his family growing more and more alarmed as his former times of illness in Jamaica loom large in their minds and as his sickness grows as large as threats of violence. He takes pills, but this is not enough. At times, he will run manically around the stage, powerful moments which mirror circles of economic enslavement and racism. He disintegrates near the play's end when Girl and Chloe begin shoving on his security uniform over his pyjamas, trying to get him out the door for work. Here, *thirsty* raises important, unanswered questions: Why is he being sent to work while he is in such a state? Girl has, indeed, promised him that they'll move into a larger place when money is saved, as their cramped conditions seem to be exacerbating his illness, but economic advancement doesn't seem to be a possibility. Who or what system is monitoring his drugs? He should be in hospital, but, then again, with social safety nets so under fire and tenuous in this play, one questions just how much of a saviour a hospital would be. Is Alan a man without choices? Is his situation utterly hopeless?

"No one understands how a prophet is made," says Alan. And *thirsty* does, indeed, lead its audience to consider whether Alan is a raving megalomaniac, a frequent sign of mental disorder, or if he walks a thin line, as soothsayers often do, between madness and reality, madness and divination. "I wanted life to be different here, but god does what he does," concludes Alan. Perhaps the audience is left wondering whether Alan's fierce reliance on faith is, in fact, understandable — what else does one have but god, after all, when



Jackie Richardson, Andrew Moodie

the world is so messed up? "The world don't value good people," Alan declares moments before his death, his words echoing that same claim made by his mother earlier in the play.

But the gods will fail him. Tellingly, Alan strips his torso bare at times throughout the play, and we are presented with another echo (attributable most likely to Hinton's direction) — Shakespeare's King Lear who, on the heath as he grew progressively mad (though, like Alan, also began to see truths in madness), ripped his "lendings" off. Yes, in many ways, *thirsty* at this point presents us with the story of King Lear, set in a different time and context — the story of a man "more sinned against than sinning". And when Alan, played stunningly by Andrew Moodie, gathers and brings into his house stolen flowers from the neighbours' gardens (his little "thefts" creating furor), the audience witnesses something somewhat reminiscent of the wildflowers and madness which framed Tatsuya Nakadai (as Hidetora Ichimonji) in Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, *Ran*. True, Alan cannot be held accountable for his own demise (as Lear 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 bike she has been promised by both her mother and father (the bike having constituted the girl's station throughout the play, situated centre stage), the front end rising into the air and some sort of freedom within reach. As Chloe has said, "dreams are anything but simple," yet Girl aims to dream still. "One day I will record the tenses of light," she says, quoting text verbatim from Brand's poetry collection, though, as she also says, "not now." For as the play closes, she notes, as *thirsty*'s narrator does, that "in the city there is no simple love or fidelity . . . / nights insomniac with pinholes 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 with undying affection, Alan mesmerising in his ability to move between states, it is

Carol Cece 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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