

Spare some time for 'Brothers'

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There was an era when colonialism and its ramifications meant everything. 's "Ti-Jean and his Brothers," an expansive allegorical drama exuberantly staged at Central Square Theater, transports us to that time.

Walcott's world — the play is set on a unnamed Caribbean island — does not simply involve the charged dynamic of white influence subduing an emerging black identity. It is a world where identity is elusive, and where good and evil — mostly evil — are visible companions.

There is much to like in this ambitious co-production between the Underground Railway Theater and Boston Playwrights' Theatre, which Walcott, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1992, founded 30 years ago. The multiskilled cast — everyone sings, plays an instrument and dances — portrays multiple roles as well. Director Megan Sandberg-Zakian's vision molds the heavily symbolic script into a more accessible narrative and is well-served by the sets (Sara Ossana) and costumes (Katherine O'Neill), which let the cast realize its various roles without calling attention to their complexity.

Language can be a powerful tool — from a poet like Walcott, almost a drug. In his imagining, language brings his characters their strength, and proves their weaknesses. The plot, from its opening to its closing "Crick, Crack" — an island storytelling trope — blends Caribbean and African folk tales with harsh colonial symbolism. Three brothers, from oldest to youngest — or largest (literally, Gros-Jean) to smallest (Ti-, or 'Petit' Jean) — confront the devil in a deadly battle of wits. Only Ti-Jean, the least skilled, prevails.

The brothers: Gros- (Hampton Sterling Fluker), Mi- (Cedric Lilly) and Ti-Jean (Kervin George Germain) all transform their roles, turning caricature into reality. Even as the first two brothers fall to the devil's gambit, they skillfully straddle the line between simple and worldly.

Ti-Jean's forest allies, Frog (Ramona Lisa Alexander), Firefly (Joseph Ahmed), Bird (Kristin Calabria) and Cricket (Fedna Jacquet), who all get a crack at playing the devil as well, bring life to the stage. The music — directed and performed by Kera Washington — is a pastiche of folklike tunes with comic interspersing of popular ditties, including the "Jeopardy" theme.

"Ti-Jean" is staged as part of series of Caribbean-themed events aimed at renewing awareness of last year's earthquake in Haiti. As a milestone in Derek Walcott's far-reaching creative output, it's not to be missed.

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