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THEATER

Review: In 'Invisible Thread,' a Gay New Yorker Goes to Uganda

Invisible Thread | Off Broadway, Musical | Closing Date: December 27, 2015 | Second Stage Theatre, 305 W. 43rd St. | 212-246-4422

By **CHARLES ISHERWOOD** DEC. 2, 2015

When faced with a personal crisis — the chilly reception he gets from his church in New York when he tells the pastor that he’s gay — Griffin, the black central character of the musical “Invisible Thread,” at Second Stage Theater, makes a counterintuitive choice. He heads off to volunteer at a religious compound in Uganda, a country notorious for its virulent hostility toward homosexuality.

When his white boyfriend, Ryan (Corey Mach), expresses shock that Griffin didn’t find somewhere closer to home to volunteer for the poor, Griffin snaps, “I am scared to go to the South Bronx!”

Inspired by the real experiences of Griffin Matthews, who portrays Griffin and wrote the show with his real partner, Matt Gould (the show’s conductor and music director), “Invisible Thread” is moistened with sentiment and a little scattered when it comes to story. Even in its early scenes, the musical, directed by Diane Paulus (“Finding Neverland,” “Pippin”), makes odd choices about what to dramatize and how: The fateful meeting with Griffin’s pastor, for example, is merely referred to, as is the cold shoulder Griffin gets from his fellow choir members, whom he considers his friends.

Once Griffin arrives in Uganda, the energy increases. Griffin tells us that he's there for six weeks to help build a school, under the auspices of one Pastor Jim, whose compound he lives in. (We never see this character, either; perhaps Mr. Matthews's understandable enmity toward pastors continues.)

But Griffin becomes more engaged in the plight of a group of teenagers he meets one day after they steal his backpack (in fun): Grace (Kristolyn Lloyd), Ronny (Tyrone Davis Jr.), Eden (Nicolette Robinson) and Ibrahim (Jamar Williams), who formed a makeshift family after their parents died. (Buoyant and charming though their performances are, none are quite convincing as teenagers.)

Since they cannot afford to go to school, Griffin agrees to give them lessons. This new purpose comes to replace his original intentions when he learns from Jacob (Michael Luwoye, the most moving of the performers), who lives and works in the compound alongside his sister, Joy (a wryly funny Adeola Role), that Pastor Jim's project is most likely self-serving. The school will be sold for a profit.

The music for "Invisible Thread" is polished, melodic pop-rock in the vein of "Rent" (at one point, Ryan quotes a famous lyric from that show, "No day but today"), with songs for the Ugandans naturally infused with African chants and rhythms. The band, placed in corners of the stage, plays with ample dynamism under Mr. Gould's lively conducting. But many songs tend to be soul-baring ballads or generic expressions of uplift ("Put it all on the line while you still have the time") that fail to advance the story, lending the first act, in particular, a static quality.

Infusions of vitality are supplied by the choreographers Sergio Trujillo and Darrell Grand Moultrie. But there's something pasted-on about the dancing, as if a musical set in Africa must have joyous, foot-stomping passages or it wouldn't be authentic. These sequences are not remotely integral to the plot.

Mr. Matthews provides a beaming focus as Griffin, his wiry frame bouncing around the stage. As Ryan, who is (surprise!) an aspiring musical theater composer, the affable Mr. Mach sings the ardent title song, expressing his feeling

of deep connection to Griffin, despite the distance between them.

But Ryan is awkwardly integrated into the show — scenes in Uganda are interrupted by his musical complaints about his unsatisfying life in New York — at least until he shows up in Africa and, in a formulaic plot turn, begins to suspect that Griffin is growing a little too close to Jacob.

Griffin's attempts to connect with the Ugandans, and his racial heritage, are depicted with heart and humor. (His students are skeptical and think of him as white.) Funny, too, are Griffin and Ryan's desperate attempts to drum up funds once they return to New York: "Are they AIDS orphans?" a potential donor asks. "Good! Because AIDS orphans are the most important orphans. And it's a tax write-off." The show also eventually addresses how Ugandans have been taught to find homosexuality abhorrent. (Most of the events take place in 2005, before the more outrageous laws against homosexuality were on the books.)

But while its exotic setting lends it some freshness, "Invisible Thread" is ultimately pretty conventional. We never really enter fully into the lives of the Africans. They seem to be there to provide teaching moments for their teacher, moral lessons in the inequities of the world, or illustrations of the benighted ways of Uganda. For all his good intentions, Griffin — and, by extension, we in the audience — never move beyond being cultural tourists.

Invisible Thread

Second Stage Theatre 305 W. 43rd St. Midtown West | 212-246-4422

2st.com: <http://www.2st.com>

Category Off Broadway, Musical

Credits Written by Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews; Directed by Diane Paulus

Cast Starring Melody Betts, Rodrick Covington, Kevin Curtis, Tyrone Davis, Jr., Nkrumah Gatling, Latrisa Harper, Jason Herbert, Aisha Jackson, Kristolyn Lloyd, Michael Luwoye, Corey Mach, Tiffany Mann, Griffin Matthews, Jeremy Pope, Jamard Richardson, Nicolette Robinson, Adeola Role, Conor Ryan and Jamar Williams

Preview October 31, 2015

Opened December 2, 2015

Closing Date December 27, 2015

Upcoming Shows

Friday	December 4	7:00 PM
Saturday	December 5	2:00 PM
Saturday	December 5	8:00 PM
Sunday	December 6	2:00 PM
Sunday	December 6	7:00 PM

This information was last updated: Dec. 2, 2015

Invisible Thread By Matt Gould and Griffin Matthews; directed by Diane Paulus; choreography by Sergio Trujillo; co-choreographer, Darrell Grand Moultrie; sets by Tom Pye; costumes by ESosa; lighting by Justin Townsend; sound by Jonathan Deans; projections by Peter Nigrini; artistic adviser, Dick Scanlan; story consultant, David Goldsmith; music supervisor, Remy Kurs; music director, Mr. Gould; orchestrations by Mr. Gould and Mr. Kurs; music coordinator, Howard Joines; associate director, Shira Milikowsky; production stage manager, Carolyn Boyd; associate artistic director, Christopher Burney; production manager, Jeff Wild; general manager, Seth Shepsle. Presented by Second Stage Theater, Carole Rothman, artistic director; Casey Reitz, executive director; in association with American Repertory Theater. Through Dec 27 at the Second Stage Theater, 305 West 43rd Street, 212-246-4422, 2st.com. Running time: 2 hours. **WITH:** Tyrone Davis Jr. (Ronny), Kristolyn Lloyd (Grace), Michael Luwoye (Jacob), Corey Mach (Ryan), Griffin Matthews (Griffin), Nicolette Robinson (Eden), Adeola Role (Joy), Jamar Williams (Ibrahim), and Melody Betts, Rodrick Covington, Kevin Curtis, Latrisa Harper, Jason Herbert, Aisha Jackson and Jamard Richardson (Ensemble).

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