

“Master Harold” ...and the boys

World Theatre and Performance

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Theatre as an art form has the unique ability to excite and entice us. It opens our eyes to the world around us and reminds us of a past that should not be forgotten. The stage allows a culture to transcend itself in a way that no other place really can. A special and particularly tragic time in history that comes to life on stage is apartheid driven South Africa. The Township Theatre genre emerged from this time and has offered beautifully poignant expressions of the struggle for freedom. This genre is exceptional because it gives the audience hope for a better future; “it is about not only what is, but what could be,” (*South African Township Theatre 1276*). Athol Fugard, a white, South African playwright brought such a masterpiece to the stage in 1982. The story develops within the socially relevant space of a tearoom in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 1950. Fugard’s “*Master Harold*” ...and the boys creates layers of virtual space within the tearoom set as the play addresses themes of freedom, and harmony. This particular play endeavors to represent something real in history; a real tearoom with real people in it, having actual experiences. Fugard seamlessly weaves the metaphor of a dance floor and flying a kite as imagery for freedom and harmony.

Once Fugard establishes the physical tearoom space he places his characters in the social spaces that the tearoom indicates. During the years of apartheid in South Africa, affluent white patrons visited tearooms to sit and have tea with colleagues and perhaps discuss issues of the day. Black African workers served white patrons. As a public space, the tearoom represents a bigoted world where distinct race lines still exist. Fugard chooses to open the play with Willie on his hands and knees mopping up the floor and Sam sitting at a table reading a comic book. They are there to work. But when the doors are shut and it is just Sam and Willie, “The tea room resembles a crowded ballroom dance floor; it is a safe world inhabited only by the boys.” So

depending on whether or not the tearoom is open to the public, it manifests different spaces for Willie and Sam. Later we find out that Hally, the character that Fugard writes as himself, grew up in the tearoom; it is like his home. Hally, Sam, and Willie all share the physical space of the tearoom during the play, and yet appear to be in different social places throughout. During business hours, the tearoom for Willie simply exists as a place of employment. He knows his “place” at the tearoom, addresses Hally as “Master” and goes about his work without conflict with his employers. Sam, on the other hand, seems to struggle in the tearoom. He is a sort of transcendent character, meaning that he continuously tries to look past color during his interactions with Hally. He spends time teaching and learning from Hally and serves as his mentor and friend throughout his youth. Sam’s character is reminiscent of Mr. Black from Fatima Dike’s *The Glass House*. Like Mr. Black, Sam “transcends problems of race” in his relationship with Hally, or at least he tries to (Dike 148). But the public social space of the tearoom and his own dark skin serve as constant reminders of the social hierarchy that is supposed to exist between him and Hally according to the social constructions of apartheid. The space of the tearoom exists for Sam as both a place of employment and the setting within which his relationship with Hally has grown over the past several years. We see him struggle with what his place is in the tearoom through the dance floor metaphor when Hally returns from school.

Within the tearoom, Fugard plays with the image of a dance as a symbol of harmonious existence as we dance through the clutter of our lives. “In the course of rearranging the furniture, the boys have set up a difficult obstacle course, which only experienced dancers can negotiate.” This obstacle course is set up on stage, but the implication of it is that those who cannot skillfully

navigate the clutter will inevitably” bump” into one another, which the characters in the play do. Fugard layers these collisions and almost puts them in a scale that broadens from individual bumps all the way to national conflicts. These collisions articulate quite exquisitely how misunderstandings among people create unnecessary conflict. Because the dance is supposed to be this stunning art that is not only safe but beautiful, the collisions are ugly and disruptive to the dance. The collisions we see in “*Master Harold*”...and the boys mostly occur between individuals. Collisions occur between family members who disturb the peace of a household or family. Hally and his father collide which represents the clash between the innocent and the jaded as we learn that Hally’s father is a rather bigoted and ignorant man. Not only does Hally’s frustration with his father create tension in his family, it manifests itself in his ill-treatment of his friend and mentor, Sam. This transition from innocence to bigotry also occurs in the space of the tearoom, a public space which clearly distinguishes “white” from “black” by the very nature of what it is. The clutter and potential for collisions in the tearoom also speak to the collisions between nations and states at war with one another on a grander scale. The play suggests that the only way to prevent those collisions is to either learn how to dance around the clutter or clean it up. Sam’s speech on page 1295 articulates the series of metaphorical collisions that occur during the course of the play:

“And it’s beautiful because that is what you want life to be like. But instead, like you said, Hally, we’re bumping into each other all the time. Look at the three of us this afternoon: I’ve bumped into Willie, the two of us have bumped into you, you’ve bumped into your mother, she bumping into your Dad...None of us knows the steps and there’s no music playing. And it doesn’t stop with us. The whole world is doing it all the time. Open a newspaper and what do you read? America has bumped into Russia, England is bumping into India, rich man bumps into poor and, those are big collisions, Hally. They make for a lot of bruises. People get hurt in all that bumping, and we’re sick and tired of it now. It’s been going on for too long. Are we never going to get it right?...Learn to

dance like champions instead of always being just a bunch of beginners at it?" (Fugard, 1295).

The dance represents what Sam's goal is, as well as what Township theatre strives to achieve: an understanding that the "dance floor is like...like being in a dream about a world in which accidents don't happen." The dance floor represents the world as most people would like it to be. A world where collisions don't occur and people don't constantly "bump into" one another over issues of race, class, intelligence, or any other separating factor people. The dance represents the virtual space of life and the dance floor is the world.

Despite its suggestion that collisions create problems in our society, this play presents a rather direct attempt at using those collisions to teach difficult lessons in an imperfect world. The collisions that Hally (and arguably the audience as well) learn the most from are those that he has with his father and with Sam. When Hally was a child, Sam retrieved Hally's father from a bar after he had passed out from being "dead drunk" and unable to get home. This event made Hally feel so ashamed of himself and his father that he did nothing but "carry on just looking down at the floor," (Fugard, 1299). In the telling of this story, we are taken into the virtual space of Hally's past growing up in apartheid divided South Africa and we are shown a side of Hally that is not revealed when his character first appears in the play. We also see the deep compassion that Sam feels towards Hally as he reminisces about making a kite for Hally after his father's episode. Even after Hally changes, perhaps forever, his relationship with Sam after their particular "bump", Sam tells Hally, "...that's why I made that kite, I wanted you to look up, be proud of something, of yourself." As a wonderfully moving symbol of freedom in the play, the kite serves several different purposes. First, it takes us into the virtual time of Hally's youth

which helps us understand his relationship with his father a little bit better. Second, it reveals that perhaps Sam has had a much greater hand in Hally's growth and development into a man than any other figure in his life; more of a father than his own father. And finally, it represents the freedom that is possible if all people learn to coexist harmoniously. When we fly kites, we must look up. There exists within the act of looking up a certain liberation as we stretch our heads back and just enjoy the view. The image of a flying kite epitomizes freedom and once created a feeling of self worth within Hally that he has struggled to find his whole life because of the shame he feels towards his drunken, crippled father. At the end of the play it rains. Hally tells Sam, "you can't fly kites on rainy days," which almost closes the play with a certain hopelessness. But as Sam puts the responsibility on Hally to overcome racism and shame, he suggests that perhaps there is some optimism that someday they will be able to fly again and he and Hally will be able to look up into the sky at the kite without shame both equally free and equally men.

In "*Master Harold*" ...*and the boys* Fugard offers a beautiful metaphor to explain how living in harmony is not only possible but necessary if we all want to live freely together. The virtual spaces in this play created within the tearoom and the image of a kite transcend the pages of this play and remind us that someday we must all grow up, understand harsh realities in the world, and do our best to lead ourselves out of oppression and conflict so that we can all look up and fly kites together.