NOTE

1. John Ashbery, *Some Trees* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956) 26–30. All subsequent references will be to this volume.

Fugard's MASTER HAROLD . . . AND THE BOYS

Many writers have noted the conflict between idealism and reality in Athol Fugard's *Master Harold . . . and the Boys*. Dennis Walder, for example, describes a "gap between the . . . harsh, even violent reality" that the play's characters endure, and the "ideal world imagined by Sam" with his "idea of dancing as a paradigm of universal harmony" (122). Others have noted a second, closely related conflict: that between self-esteem and self-loathing. Frank Rich observes, "Fugard's point is simple enough: before we can practice compassion . . . we must learn to respect ourselves" (C21). But no writer has pointed out that both conflicts are neatly summarized within the play by one more conflict: that between looking up and looking down.

This last conflict is especially suited to a play, because the audience can *see* characters looking up or down. And Fugard, who usually directs the premieres of his plays, is especially sensitive to the theatre's physical possibilities, as other writers have observed (e.g., Hauptfleisch 608–11; Weales). In his published notebooks, Fugard states, "Only a fraction of my truth is in the words," adding that the rest resides in "the carnal reality of the actor in space and time" (171). Thus, it is no surprise that the conflict between looking up and looking down in *Master Harold* emerges through visual elements as well as through dialogue.[1]

Fugard begins establishing the significance of looking down the moment the play begins. As the curtain rises, the audience sees Sam and Willie, two black servants working in a restaurant in the apartheid South Africa of 1950. Willie is on his knees, scrubbing the restaurant floor (1–2). This task forces him to look down, and as Russell Vandenbroucke notes, his image "is an inescapable reminder of the role blacks are expected to play" in his society (193). Thus, looking down is associated with an oppressive reality.

Fugard then begins associating looking up with achieving the ideal world symbolized by dance. Just seconds into the play, Willie rises from scrubbing the floor, begins practicing a dance step, and asks Sam for pointers. Part of the advice Sam gives is "Don't look down!" (4). Sam tells Willie that dancing should "look like romance," which he defines as a "love story with happy ending" (5). In the widely available videotape of the play, Sam looks upward as he says, "It must look like romance." Significantly, the actor playing Sam on

the videotape, Zakes Mokae, previously played the role on Broadway under Fugard's direction.

After Sam's comment, Fugard further establishes the conflict between ideal and real. Willie counters Sam's idealistic vision by describing his own reality: Hilda, his girlfriend and dance partner, has no teeth; she has told authorities that he is behind in child support payments to her; he suspects that she has been sleeping with other men and that her child is not really his son; she cannot keep up with the beat when they dance; and because he has beaten her in frustration, she now refuses to come near him, thus leaving him not only estranged from his lover, but also without a partner for the upcoming ballroom dance competition (6–7). Facing this reality, Willie has trouble looking up toward an idealistic vision.

Soon Hally, the restaurant owner's teenage son, enters. His superior position is immediately established visually, as Willie jokingly springs to attention and salutes him (9). But when the ensuring dialogue reveals Hally's indifference to his exams and Sam's subtle strategies to help him pass them, we realize that Hally lacks self-esteem and that Sam tries to improve the boy's self-image (17–24).

Fugard then associates high self-esteem with looking up, as Hally recalls the time that Sam made him a kite. Typically, Hally had assumed that the project would fail, as he states, "I thought, 'Like everything else in my life, here comes another fiasco'" (29). But the kite did fly and, Hally recalls, "I was so proud of us! . . . I had a stiff neck the next day from looking up so much" (30–31).

Not until late in the play does Sam reveal why he made the kite, in the process revealing one reason for Hally's low self-esteem. He reminds Hally of the time Hally's father passed out in a bar and had to be carried home by Sam—with Hally, still a child, forced to accompany Sam to enable him to enter the whites-only bar. With Hally following behind, Sam had carried the father home past crowds of staring people, and then had to clean him up from having "messed in his trousers." Sam adds,

> After we got him to bed you came back with me to my room and sat in a corner and carried on just looking down at the ground. And for days after that! You hadn't done anything wrong, but you went around as if you owed the world an apology for being alive. I didn't like seeing that! . . . If you really want to know, that's why I made you that kite. I wanted you to look up, be proud of something, of yourself. . . . (58).

But by this point, the hope the Hally will look up has faded, for he has subjected Sam to a vicious attack climaxed by his spitting in the black man's face. Thus, Hally has destroyed his relationship with his best friend and surrogate father; he has turned away from Sam's vision of universal cooperation; and he

has increased his own burden of shame, thus lowering his self-esteem still further.

At the end it is Willie, not Hally, who begins to look up and share Sam's vision. He states that he will apologize to Hilda, promise not to beat her anymore, and "romance with her from beginning to end." Then he plays the restaurant's juke box and asks Sam to dance, saying, "Let's dream. . . . You lead, I follow" (60).

Although the stage directions do not specify it, in performance the men's gazes undoubtedly reflect the reversal that has taken place involving Willie and Hally. Because Willie has finally internalized the lessons Sam has been teaching, during the final dance sequence he surely cannot violate Sam's earlier injunction, "Don't look down!" In contrast, because Hally is repeatedly described as ashamed of his outburst (52, 58), at the end he is surely avoiding Sam's eyes, looking at the floor just as he did after his father passed out in the bar. The actor who played Willie on the videotape, longtime Fugard associate John Kani, never lets his gaze drift downward during the closing dance sequence; while Matthew Broderick, as Hally, looks down almost constantly during the final portion of the play.

Because of Hally's actions, audiences are utterly harrowed by the play's end (Lelyveld C17; Rich, "Theater" C17). But if we look beyond the play to the reality behind it, there is hope. Since the play is based on actual events from Fugard's childhood (*Notebooks* 25–26), we know that in real life, the boy who spat in the face of a black man named Sam outgrew his anger and racism, and even used the incident to create a play celebrating a vision of universal cooperation. And South Africa has not only abolished apartheid, but has elected a black man as its president. Perhaps things, and people, are finally looking up.

—BRIAN SUTTON, *University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

NOTES

1. Although visual elements discussed in this essay come from a videotaped performance in which two of the play's three roles are performed by actors recreating characters they had originally created under Fugard's direction, stage movement is finally a director's and an actor's choice, not part of the written play itself, especially when the movement is not specified in the stage directions.

WORKS CITED

Fugard, Athol. *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys*. New York: Knopf, 1982.

———. *Notebooks: 1960–1977*. New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1983.

Hauptfleisch, Temple. "Athol Fugard: The Image the Work, and the 'Carnal Reality.'" *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers*. Ed. Robert L. Ross, New York: Garland, 1991. 607–20.

Lelyveld, Joseph. "*Master Harold* Stuns Johannesburg Audience." *New York Times*, 24 March