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"Master Harold" . . .
and the boys

Athol Fugard

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"Master Harold" . . . and the boys
Athol Fugard

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The Wadsworth Casebook Series for Reading, Research, and Writing has its origins in our anthology *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (Fifth Edition, 2004), which in turn arose out of our many years of teaching college writing and literature courses. The primary purpose of each Casebook in the series is to offer students a convenient, self-contained reference tool that they can use to complete a research project for an introductory literature course.

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as a "miracle."¹ "Why did you make that kite, Sam?" he asks of the black servant whose gift it was—but the answer is not given until much later in the play. Nor can Hally recollect the reason for Sam's failure to share in the experience of high-flying delight:

HALLY: . . . You left me after that, didn't you? You explained how to get it down, we tied it to the bench so that I could sit and watch it, and you went away. I wanted you to stay, you know. I was a little scared of having to look after it by myself.

SAM: [*Quietly.*] I had work to do, Hally.

In the final moments of the play Sam provides the simple explanation: the kite had been a symbolic gift to console the child against the degrading shame of having to cope with a drunken and crippled father—an attempt to raise his eyes from the ground of humiliation:

That's not the way a boy grows up to be a man! . . . But the one person who should have been teaching you what that means was the cause of your shame. 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 . . .

The second question has an answer more readily understood by one familiar with apartheid's so-called "petty" operations:

I couldn't sit down there and stay with you. It was a "Whites Only" bench. You were too young, too excited to notice then. But not anymore. If you're not careful . . . Master Harold . . . you're going to be sitting up there by yourself for a long time to come, and there won't be a kite in the sky.

This, in essence, is the psychopathology of apartheid. Growing up to be a "man" within a system that deliberately sets out to humiliate black people, even to the point of relegating them to separate benches, entails the danger of habitual indifference to the everyday details that shape black/white relationships and, finally, pervert them. It is not merely that racial prejudice is *legislated* in South Africa. It insinuates itself into every social sphere of existence, until the very language of ordinary human discourse begins to reflect the policy that makes black men subservient to the power exercised by white children. Hally, the seventeen-year-old white boy whose affectionately diminutive name is an index of his social immaturity, is "Master Harold" in the context of attitudes fostered by apartheid. And the black man who is his mentor and surrogate father is the "boy"—in all but compassion, humanity, and moral intelligence.

Each of the eight sources in this section* offers insights into "Master Harold" . . . and the boys—insights that can help you understand, enjoy, and perhaps write about the play. The sources included in this section range from Fugard's autobiographical notes concerning the incident that suggested the play to critical articles commenting on specific ideas and scenes. You may choose to use these sources to generate ideas that could be developed into a paper; you may also find material that supports a paper topic that you have already chosen. Once you have read these sources, you can use the bibliography at the back of this book to locate further resources pertaining to Fugard's life and works as well as information about South Africa. Remember to document any words or ideas that you borrow from these and any other sources.

ERROL DURBACH

"Master Harold" . . . and the boys: Athol Fugard and the Psychopathology of Apartheid

In this play, dredged out of Athol Fugard's painful memories of a South African adolescence, at least one event stands out in joyous recollection: the boy's exhilarating, liberating, and ultimately transcendent experience of flying a kite made out of tomato-box slats, brown paper, discarded stockings, and string. From the scraps and leavings of the depressingly mundane, the boy intuits the meaning of a soul-life; and he responds to the experience

* Note that the Durbach, Vandenbroucke, Mshengu, and Jordan articles do not use the parenthetical documentation style recommended by the Modern Language Association and explained in the Appendix (pages 159–172).

This, finally, is the only definition that the South African system can conceive of in the relationship of White to Black; and Hally, with the facility of one habituated to such power play, saves face and forestalls criticism by rapidly realigning the components of friendship into the socio-political patterns of mastery and servitude. Like quicksilver, he shifts from intimate familiarity with his black companions, to patronizing condescension to his social inferiors, to an appalling exercise of power over the powerless "boys" simply by choosing to play the role of "baas":

Sam! Willie! [*Grabs his ruler and gives Willie a vicious whack on the bum.*] How the hell am I supposed to concentrate with the two of you behaving like bloody children! [. . .] Get back to your work. You too, Sam. [*His ruler.*] Do you want another one, Willie?

[*Sam and Willie return to their work. Hally uses the opportunity to escape from his unsuccessful attempt at homework. He struts around like a little despot, ruler in hand, giving vent to his anger and frustration.*]

Within the culture portrayed in the play there is nothing particularly remarkable about a white child hitting a black man. It would have been unheard of on the other hand for a black man, in the South Africa of the 1950s, to strike back. *His* anger and frustration could be unleashed only upon those even more pitifully dispossessed of the human rights to dignity and respect. The white child hits the black man, and the black man hits the black woman. It is a system in which violence spirals downwards in a hierarchy of degradation—as Fugard shows in Willie's relationship with his battered dancing partner who can no longer tolerate the abuse.

A very simple racial equation operates within apartheid: White = "Master"; Black = "Boy." It is an equation which ignores traditional relationships of labor to management, of paid employee to paying employer, or contractual relationships between freely consenting parties. And Sam's attempt to define the nature of his employment in conventional terms is countermanded by Hally's application of the equation:

HALLY: You're only a servant here, and don't forget it. [. . .] And as far as my father is concerned, all you need to remember is that he's your boss.

SAM: [*Needled at last.*] No, he isn't. I get paid by your mother.

HALLY: Don't argue with me, Sam!

SAM: Then don't say he's my boss.

HALLY: He's a white man and that's good enough for you.

What needles Sam is the thought of being paid for his work by a bigot who shows him none of the simple human respect that is everyone's most urgent need in Fugard's world—the white child's in a family that shames him, and the black man's in a culture that humiliates him. It is the common denominator that Sam and Hally share; and the ultimate goal of "Master" Harold's power-play is to secure his own desire for self-respect at the expense of a man whose native dignity proves all but impervious to these attempts to "boy" him. It is a self-defeating and self-destructive ploy, imposed by threat and blackmail upon a relationship which has all the potential for mutual comfort, support, and love. It is the human content of their shared affection that Hally is about to petrify into the equation of apartheid:

HALLY: To begin with, why don't you also start calling me Master Harold, like Willie.

SAM: [. . .] And if I don't?

HALLY: You might lose your job.

SAM: [*Quietly and very carefully.*] If you make me say it once, I'll never call you anything else again. [. . .] You must decide what it means to you.

HALLY: Well, I have. It's good news. Because that is exactly what Master Harold wants from now on. Think of it as a little lesson in respect, Sam, that's long overdue. [. . .] I can tell you now that somebody who will be glad to hear I've finally given it to you will be my Dad. Yes! He agrees with my Mom. He's always going on about it as well. "You must teach the boys to show you more respect, my son."

"Teaching respect" loses all semantic value in the context of apartheid. It means coercion by threat, just as "showing respect" means acquiescence through enforced abasement. It is easy to teach Willie respect—one does it with the stick, and with impunity because Willie lacks the necessary sentiment of self-regard to oppose such treatment. His predictable response is to insist that Hally whack Sam as well—the sole comfort of the wretched being to recognize fellow-sufferers in distress. But Hally cannot command Sam's respect; and if he cannot win it, his only recourse is to humiliate Sam to the point where, by default, his own pathetic superiority supervenes. Finally, the only power left to Hally is the wounding power of bigotry supported by a system in which "black" is, *ipso facto*, base. Echoing his father's words, associating himself with the very cause of his shame, he spreads the "filth" he has been taught in a racist joke—the penultimate weapon in his arsenal of power. It is a crude pun about a "nigger's arse" not being "fair"; and one senses, in the numb incredulity of the two black men, an

irreversible redefinition of their relationship with their white charge. In the ensuing silence, he belabors the pun—the double meaning of “fair” as light in color *and* just and decent—and is ensnared in the moral implications of his bid for respect through insult and abuse:

SAM: You're really trying hard to be ugly, aren't you? And why drag poor Willie into it? He's done nothing to you except show you the respect you want so badly. That's also not being fair, you know . . . and I mean just or decent.

And to underscore the embarrassment that Hally has brought upon himself, Sam performs an action of rebuke through self-abasement that reveals both the reality and the vulnerability of the “nigger's arse”—the thing that the Master feels at liberty to mock at and kick: “*He drops his trousers and underpants and presents his backside for Hally's inspection.*” His nakedness is clearly no laughing matter. It calls in question the justice and decency and fairness of an entire system which can encourage a child so to humiliate a man. Its indictment is Dostoevskian in its power to shame.

Hally's countermeasure is to exercise his power to degrade with impunity: he spits in Sam's face, saving his own by fouling another's and, in so doing, placing Sam forever in the role of “boy” to his “Master.” It is a gesture of contempt and angry frustration, the adolescent's protest against his own sense of degradation—horribly misdirected against the wrong source, as Sam instantly realizes: “The face you should be spitting in,” he says, “is your father's . . . but you used mine, because you think you're safe inside your fair skin . . . and this time I don't mean just or decent.” It is Hally's “white” father who ensures the “principle of perpetual disappointment” in the boy's life—the crippled alcoholic who must be dragged out of bars fouled in his own excrement, whose chamber-pots must be emptied by the boy, and whose imminent return from the hospital provokes in Hally the thought of further humiliating servitude. But it is Hally's black “father” who must bear the brunt of his anguish and his shame. Sam has become his “spitting boy” just as Willie has been his “whipping boy,” the recipient of a contempt which he cannot reveal to his father, whom he both loves and despises. This is the moment, Fugard admitted in an interview, “which totally symbolized the ugliness, the potential ugliness waiting for me as a White South African.”²

The overwhelming shame of the actual event is recorded in the section of Fugard's *Notebooks*³ dealing with his childhood memories of growing up in Port Elizabeth. But he sets the play five years later, in 1950,⁴ that *annus mirabilis* of Apartheid legislation; and Fugard's political point of view is

nowhere more clearly revealed than in his location of the encroaching ugliness of South Africa's destiny in a *personal* rather than a *national* failure of moral decency. Despite the statutory enforcement of racist laws in the 1950s, apartheid (like charity) is seen to begin *at home*, in the small details of everyday existence. There is no sense, in the play, of the Nationalist Government's Population Registration Act of 1950 with its racial system of classification by color, the Group Areas Act of 1950 which demarcated the areas of permissible domicile for the races and controlled the ownership of property in those areas, the 1950 Amendment to the Immorality Act which prohibited sexual contact across the color bar, or the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 which empowered the minister of Justice to ban suspect individuals without trial or right of appeal—indeed, without even notifying the detainee of the nature of his offense. There is nothing of Kafka's nightmare about Fugard's world, nothing of the political absurdity of Václav Havel's vision of man's soul under totalitarianism. Nor does he invoke the ridiculous terms of the Separate Amenities Act which, in 1953, would subject a black man sitting on a “Whites Only” bench (“reserved for the exclusive use of persons belonging to a particular race or class, being a race or class to which he does not belong”)⁵ to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds or imprisonment not exceeding three months, or to both.

Fugard's is not a drama of political protest nor an exposé of a corrupt regime entrenched in its position of power. His detractors on the militant Left call him bitterly to task for failing to fight against the system, just as his Right-wing detractors point to the obsolescence of his political vision—to the disappearance of “Whites Only” signs on South African benches in the 1980s. Plays like *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* or *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* may, indeed, seem anachronistic after the rescinding of the Immorality Act and the Pass laws with which they deal. But the psychopathology of apartheid in Fugard's drama is quite distinct from Government policy. There is no guarantee, when the letter of all the 1950's legislation has passed into oblivion, that the *attitudes* which informed its spirit will disappear as well. The Laws are crucial historical background to Fugard's world, but these attitudes are the substance of his most insistent misgivings about apartheid's operation upon human relationships.

In the absence of explicit political comment, it might seem tendentious to equate the social awkwardness of a troubled teenager with government policy. Hally's condescending attitude towards his “boys,” his failure to share with them any of the chocolate and cake and ice-cream that he is constantly consuming—these may be evidence of an ingrained arrogance and selfishness rather than a culturally conditioned attitude to an “inferior” race.

But these unobtrusive details underscore the more overt acts of insulting racism in the play. Having whacked one "boy" with a ruler and spat in the other's face, his last shamefaced act is to remove the wretched day's takings from the cash register—essentially small change—and tell Willie to lock up for him. One entrusts the "boy" with the keys to the tearoom, but not with the few coins which might tempt him to play the jukebox or take the bus home. One may *give* a "boy" some cake or chocolate, but never *offer* it. Every social gesture, within the South African context, becomes an affirmation or a negation of the principle of apartheid; and every act is more or less political.

Against the petty and unconscious cruelties of Hally, Fugard juxtaposes the magnanimity of Sam: the compassionate father, the good friend, the moral teacher. He offers a solution to the predicament, again in *personal* rather than *political* terms—a response so lacking in revolutionary fervor as to alienate, once again, the new generation of post-Sowetan critics of Athol Fugard's drama.⁶ Mastering his violence and the desire to strike Hally for spitting at him, Sam carefully considers the strategy of aggression with Willie, and they both agree to suffer the indignity in stoical resignation:

WILLIE: [. . .] But maybe all I do is go cry at the back. He's little boy, Boet Sam. Little *white* boy. Long trousers now, but he's still little boy.
SAM: [*His violence ebbing away into defeat as quickly as it flooded.*] You're right. So go on, then: groan again, Willie. You do it better than me.

Though struck to the quick, they endure the insult with weeping and groaning rather than striking back. There is no revolution in the St. George's Park Tearoom—but not because the black man is culturally conditioned to patience, nor for fear of putting his job in jeopardy. In Fugard's world, as in Prospero's, the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance, in humane reasoning rather than fury; and Sam trusts, once again, to his capacity for moving Master Harold to shame through moral suasion and exemplary behavior. He forgives the little white boy who knows no better, and behaves like a "man" in order to teach him the rudiments of "manly" behavior. Turning the other cheek may not be politically expedient as a response to apartheid, but where problems are engendered at the personal level it is only at the personal level that they may be resolved.

"I oscillate," says the precocious Hally early in the play, "between hope and despair for this world. . . . But things will change, you wait and see." On the whole, Sam's politics are ranged on the side of hope—the hope born, initially, of a naive vision of reform and racial harmony but modulating, in the final scenes, to the more somber hope of salvaging the scrap of

value remaining in his relationship with the little white master. He dreams of a world transformed by some benevolent reformer—a savior like Napoleon for whom all men were equal before the law, or another Abraham Lincoln who fought for the oppressed, or a Tolstoy, or Gandhi, or Christ; and he envisions life as a celestial ballroom in which no accidents occur, in which powers are harmoniously aligned on the global dance floor. But, like Hally, he is forced to acknowledge the harsh reality of things: we go on waiting for the "Man of Magnitude," he admits, bumping and colliding until we're sick and tired. All that remains is the small gesture, the little act of decency that may turn a fragment of the dream into something real. This, finally, is what he hopes for. He takes off his servant's jacket and returns in clothes that no longer distinguish him as a "boy"; he addresses Hally by the affectionate diminutive once again; and he offers, very simply, the chance to "fly another kite." "You can't fly kites on rainy days," says Hally—and the rain and the wind squalling beyond the windows of the tearoom assume the depressing and hopeless condition of the entire South African situation. Better weather tomorrow? No one is sure.

At this point in the Yale Repertory production of the play,⁷ the excellent Zakes Mokae playing Sam extends his hand tentatively towards Hally in a gesture of appeal and reconciliation as important to his well-being as to the boy's; and he challenges him to change the situation through an act of personal transformation which flies in the face of his cultural and political conditioning: "You don't *have* to sit up there by yourself," he says, recalling the boy's isolation on the "Whites Only" bench. You know what that bench means now, and you can leave it any time you choose. All you've got to do is stand up and walk away from it." But ingrained attitudes die hard. Paralyzed by shame but incapable of extending himself towards the black man, Hally hesitates and then walks out into the rains as Sam's hand crumples in its gesture.

If anyone has learned a lesson from this bleak afternoon of moral instruction it is the simple, inarticulate Willie who, in his effort to comfort Sam, endorses his dream-ideal of life as a ballroom. He vows never to beat up his partner again, and slips his bus fare into the jukebox which "*comes to life in the gray twilight, blushing its way through a spectrum of soft, romantic colors.*" "Let's dream," he says. And the two men sway through the room to Sarah Vaughan's melancholy lullaby to an unhappy child—"Little man you're crying." The final dramatic image is suffused with the ambiguous tonalities typical of Fugard's best work: the rain of despair beyond the windows, the wind in which no kites fly, the hopelessness of a situation where people are driven apart by racist attitudes, the consoling music which

evokes our compassion for children who are casualties of their upbringing, the hope that shame and embarrassment might induce change in a morally receptive child, the delusory political vision of racial harmony on the South African dance floor, and the image of a world where "Whites Only" leave two black men dancing together in an act of solidarity. It is a typically Fugardian oscillation between hope and despair, qualified only by the realization that "Master Harold" grows up to be Athol Fugard and that the play itself is an act of atonement and moral reparation to the memory of Sam and "H.D.F."—the Black and the White fathers to whom it is dedicated.

It would clearly be misleading to claim that "*Master Harold*" . . . and the boys addresses the growing complexity of apartheid politics in the South Africa of 1987. It is a "history" play—a family "history" written, like O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, as an exorcism of the tormented ghosts of his childhood;⁸ but it is also a phase of South African "history," an anachronistic backward glance to a time when black men in the stoical optimism still dreamed of social change and when white boys might have been able to grasp the implications of "Whites Only" benches and choose to walk away from them. It deals with a rite of passage clumsily negotiated, a failure of love in a personal power-struggle with political implications. Alan Paton, writing in the same time-frame of history, projects a similar vision of tenuous hope for racial harmony—and also the dreadful consequences of its deferment. Msimangu, the black priest in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, speaks the powerful subtext beneath the action of Fugard's play:

But there is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves, he seeks no power, and therefore he has power. I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it.

He was grave and silent, and then he said somberly, I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating.⁹

NOTES

¹ Athol Fugard, "*Master Harold*" . . . and the boys (New York, 1982). All quotations derive from this edition.

² Quoted in Dennis Walder, *Athol Fugard* (London, 1984), p. 120.

³ Athol Fugard, *Notebooks: 1960–1977* (Johannesburg, 1983), pp. 25–26.

⁴ Fugard (b. 1932) puts his age at thirteen in the *Notebooks*, but makes Hally a youth of seventeen.

⁵ "The Separate Amenities Act, No. 49 of 1953," in Edgar H. Brookes, *Apartheid: A Documentary Study of Modern South Africa* (London, 1968), p. 88.

⁶ I have discussed the general attitude of the African Marxists and the Black militant critics towards Fugard in "Sophocles in South Africa: Athol Fugard's *The Island*," *Comparative Drama*, 18 (1984), pp. 252–264. The New York critic of "*Master Harold*" for the black paper, *Amsterdam News*, expressed disgust at a white writer who "set up a situation in which a black man's dignity is so assaulted by a little boy that he had the impulse to hit him . . . and didn't." Quoted by Margarete Seidenspinner, *Exploring the Labyrinth: Athol Fugard's Approach to South African Drama* (Essen, 1986), p. 211.

⁷ This version of the play, with Matthew Broderick as Hally, has been broadcast on PBS Television.

⁸ "I was dealing with the last unlaidd ghost in my life, who was my father." Fugard, in Russell Vandembroucke, *Truths the Hand Can Touch: The Theatre of Athol Fugard* (New York, 1985), p. 190.

⁹ Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (London, 1948), p. 42.

RUSSELL VANDENBROUCKE

Fathers and Son:

"Master Harold" . . . and the boys

"Trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed." . . .

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterward, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd 'a' knowed it would make him feel that way. —MARK TWAIN

Fugard's next play was a five-minute mime commissioned by the Actors Theatre of Louisville for its annual festival of new plays. It was part of *The American Project*, an evening of short plays on America by foreign playwrights. *The Drummer* captures a moment in the life of an urban bum who discovers a pair of drumsticks as he works his way through a pile of rubbish. Surrounded by the noises of the city, he begins to tap the sticks idly on a trashcan lid. As he becomes engrossed in his drumming, he first empties the can, then turns it upside down to make it reverberate even more. Holding his drumsticks at the ready, "He chooses a direction and sets off to take on the city. He has discovered it is full of drums . . . and he has got drumsticks." Fugard's only other extended use of mime occurs at the beginning and end of *The Island*.

In an introductory note to his three pages of stage directions, Fugard describes the model for *The Drummer*, whom Fugard had seen only once, in Times Square: "He was moving effortlessly through the congested traffic beating out a tattoo with a pair of drumsticks on anything that came to hand. . . . He wasn't begging. In fact in his relationship to the world around him the roles of giver and receiver seemed to be just the reverse. He was very joyous . . . defiantly so! . . . and seemed to have a sense of himself as being extravagantly free."

Fugard completed the play in 1979. In his undated cover letter to ElizaBeth King, Louisville's literary manager, he wrote, "Enclosed with this letter is a response to the intimidating invitation from the Actors Theatre which reached me via my good friend and agent, Esther Sherman. If it means nothing to you please do not hesitate to crumple it up and throw it into your wastepaper basket. I will be the first to understand. . . . My mandate to the actor is simple . . . find two drumsticks and with the help of those find first joy, and then courage."

Fugard's uncertainty about the piece, which he considered calling *The Beginning*, proved to be unfounded. *The Drummer* was first performed by Dierk Toporzyssek, under the direction of Michael Hankins, on February 27, 1980. In contrast to *Dimetos*, Fugard's only other commission, the reviews were largely enthusiastic. *The Drummer* was generally considered the best playlet in *The America Project*. It is the only one of his plays Fugard has never seen performed.

Asked if the exuberance of *The Drummer* marked a new direction in his writing, Fugard replied, "I think that actually from now on all I'm interested in is what I can celebrate. I've dealt with my pain. I've dealt with the misery of my country as much as I can. Now I'm just going to laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh." His prediction proved to be half right: In his next play, *Master Harold* . . . and the boys, he continued to probe his own pain, more autobiographically than ever before, but he did so with more humor and laughter than in any previous work.

For fifteen years Fugard's mother had employed a man named Sam Semela at her Jubilee Boarding House and at the St. George's Park Tea Room. Fugard was especially fond of Semela, "But there was an ambivalence in my relationship with him: a love-hate thing. I couldn't come to terms with his difference. And as a little white boy, ten or eleven years old, I had authority over this powerful mature man of about twenty-eight." After a rare quarrel between them, precipitated by something now forgotten, Fugard began bicycling home, burning with resentment: "As I rode up behind him I called

his name, he turned in mid-stride to look back and, as I cycled past, I spat in his face. Don't suppose I will ever deal with the shame that overwhelmed me the second after I had done that."

Semela was Fugard's only friend from the age of six through secondary school: "It was a very close, shared, celebratory friendship—the man and the boy. Him being the man, incidentally." According to Fugard, Semela "radiated all the qualities a boy could look to and recognize as those of a man. I thought, I can model myself on that." As I started reading, Semela started reading. He and I evolved theories, such as one about the shapes of good heads and bad heads, with such relish and enjoyment—things that a father and son should do.¹ After Fugard had finished reading a book, Semela would take it back to New Brighton to read himself.

Fugard has described the spitting incident in several interviews and had tried unsuccessfully for many years to write a play about Semela and another black waiter who had worked for his mother. *Master Harold* finally began to take shape after Fugard added an adolescent white boy to the scenario. In a letter dated October 8, 1981, a few days after completing "a reasonably substantial second draft," he expressed his satisfaction when, "I wrote the last words, a stage-direction . . . [*The men dance!*] . . . and then predictably a period of self-doubt. That always happens." *Master Harold* is a long one-act, but when Fugard wrote that it was not a "big" play, he did not mean its length: "There are none of the resonances of *Aloes*, for example. In fact I'm tempted to subtitle it: A Personal Memoir. If it succeeds at all I think 'poignant' will be the right adjective. It is also meant to have a lot of gentle humor. I faced the writing of that with considerable trepidation. But bit by bit my touch came back and I now even find myself laughing at my own jokes. I do realize that that could possibly be the onset of senility."²

Master Harold is set in 1950 in the St. George's Park Tea Room. As Sam Semela helps Willie Malopo practice his steps for the upcoming ballroom dancing championship, they are joined by Hally, a precocious seventeen-year-old whose mother runs the tea room. He and Sam soon begin a variation on their favorite game—Hally teaching Sam. They also recall their camaraderie of the past. Hally turns to an essay he must write, but the banter of Sam and Willie about the dancing championship interrupts his concentration until he realizes the championship itself could be the subject of his essay. Hally's excitement is demolished when he learns in a phone call from his mother that his alcoholic and crippled father has returned home from the hospital. Sam scolds Hally for his unfilial reaction to this news, and Hally responds savagely. He orders Sam to address him as "Master"

Harold, then repeats one of his father's racist jokes, and finally spits in Sam's face. Before Hally heads home, Sam's ire subsides and his fatherly concern returns. He and Willie are left alone to dance together.

As might be expected, Fugard's twelfth full-length play shares many traits with his previous work. He again focuses upon an intense relationship and the impediments to it; happy memories quickly give way to the recovery of the past through its vivid re-creation; characters again play with the language they love; games are initiated and roles assumed; important off-stage characters precipitate onstage action; hopes and dreams are entertained, then shattered; and a character's consciousness and self-awareness are deeply transformed. Fugard's finest work is extraordinarily simple, but never more so than *Master Harold*, whose central action is nothing more, apparently, than a brief eruption between a man and a boy.

Many writers begin their careers autobiographically and become more "objective" through time. For Fugard, the process has been the reverse. In his Township Trilogy of *No-Good Friday*, *Nongogo*, and *Tsotsi* he presents lives that were sympathetically imagined and authentically reinvented, but that were, of necessity, vicariously observed rather than directly lived. Fugard's own experiences clearly inform *The Blood Knot*, *Hello and Goodbye*, and *Boesman and Lena*, but none appropriates the drama of his own life as unabashedly as *Master Harold*. Like O'Neill before him, he uses his family not merely to lacerate it, but to exorcise his own furies. Even so, the action of *Master Harold* has a more cohesive form and clearer meaning than the actual events of Fugard's life because they have been ordered into a work of art rather than a precise historical recapitulation.

Hally is the audience's conduit into the emotional world of the play. His adolescent rebelliousness as he teeters on the fulcrum between childhood and adulthood is immediately and universally recognizable. However, far from glorifying his younger self, Fugard exposes Hally's condescension, conceit, self-pity, and general oblivion to these personal shortcomings. The intentional insults of the climax are subtly foreshadowed by the racist remarks Hally blithely makes throughout the play. These seem all the worse because they are so unthinking: spontaneous projections of his patronizing sensibility.

Despite his cocky, pseudo-intellectual pretensions, Hally takes genuine pleasure in sharing with Sam what he has just learned—whether it is mathematics, vocabulary words, history, literature, or geography. The exchanges between teacher and pupil early in the play establish their warmth and closeness. When Sam and Hally laugh at a common memory, the laugh becomes an emblem of all they have shared. Apparently, Hally has no friends

his own age. Although the servant quarters at the Jubilee had been his home-within-a-home, his family-within-a-family, the Jubilee years "are not remembered as the happiest ones of an unhappy childhood" (297).^{*} Were it not for Sam, Hally might have had no happy memories, but he does have one more special than all the rest—the day Sam gave him a kite.

The story of the kite is reminiscent of the reenacted car ride in *The Blood Knot*: a pivotal scene reaffirming the bond between a pair of characters by reminding them of a shared moment in the past. As a set piece, the kite story is as physically and emotionally palpable, joyous, and evocative as any scene Fugard has written. It is also a great deal more than a set piece. Hally thinks flying the kite must have appeared strange: "Little white boy in short trousers and a black man old enough to be his father flying a kite. It's not every day you see that" (369).

This is the only time Hally even obliquely refers to Sam as if he were his father, but the comparison exists throughout the play and has already been implied within this scene: Hally's initial fear of being mortified should others see him with Sam and the jerry-made kite has precisely the same roots as the embarrassment he has felt when his mother wears an evening gown. Such typically adolescent discomfort pales beside the public humiliation he had experienced while carrying his drunken father down a crowded Main Street. Sam recalls, "That's not the way a boy grows up to be a man! . . . But the one person who should have been teaching you what that means was the cause of your shame. 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" (651).

The story of the kite also reveals that Hally is a promising raconteur. He himself realizes it would make a nice short story, "The Kite-Flyers," if there were only a twist in the ending. (It turns out there had been a twist, but Sam had hidden it from Hally; Sam had left Hally alone on a bench at the time because it was whites-only.) Hally also thinks the kite incident could be the start of a novel called *Afternoons in Sam's Room* that would include other stories. He may also have a knack for yet another form of writing. After recalling the look and feel of Sam's room, he says, "Right, so much for the stage directions. Now the characters" (321).

Hally savors the taste of words, sometimes pretentiously, but always sincerely. His inventive mind is also evident in his approach to his school

^{*} Editor's note: All quotes are from *Master Harold . . . and the boys*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982). Line numbers are from the play as presented in this casebook.

assignment. Instead of settling for a pedestrian topic, Hally's imagination, like Fugard's when he was a decade older, seizes the simple life around him and perceives the universal truths embodied by the concrete particulars in the lives of blacks.

As extraordinary as the story of the kite is, *Master Harold* contains another set piece equally vivid. This time it is Sam's turn to tell a story, and he etches a detailed portrait of the 1950 Eastern Province Open Ballroom Dancing Championships. Sam's utopian vision of the dance floor as the embodiment of an ideal life fills the budding writer with admiration; the idyllic dreamworld of a dance floor becomes a metaphor for a world without collisions. Hally subtitles his essay "Ballroom Dancing as a Political Vision."

The banter over the kite had ended when Hally's mother had phoned to say his father *might* come home. The phone rings a second time: His father *will* come home. The intoxicating trance of the imagined ballroom is destroyed by this intrusion of reality. The imagined world that Sam and Hally have created disintegrates. Hally might have predicted as much: "Just when things are going along all right, without fail someone or something will come along and spoil everything. Somebody should write that down as a fundamental law of the Universe. The principle of perpetual disappointment" (397). Even Hally, however, could not foresee the cataclysm about to follow.

The reverie of a world without collisions ends, and Hally tears up the notes for his essay. His father has returned home and so will he, but not as a supportive, rejoicing Neoptolemus. Hally says, "Home-sweet-fucking-home. Jesus, I hate that word." (582) (*Master Harold* is one of Fugard's few scripts not set in the place its characters call home.) Hally's disaffection is more than merely intellectual, and in an emotional outburst he names a new competition to replace that of the ballroom: "the All-Comers-How-To-Make-A-Fuckup-Of-Life Championships" (586). Sam admonishes Hally, "It's your father you're talking about" (589), but Hally responds with his own caution: "Leave me and my father alone." He refuses to heed his own warning.

Hally displaces the shame he feels toward his father and directs it at a safer object, Sam. As Hally's shame turns to rage, he repeatedly tries to bait Sam, but the older man's steadfast refusal to respond only makes the boy angrier. First, Hally insists that Sam remember he is "only" a servant. Then he demands that Sam address him as Willie does, with "Master." Although Sam addresses Hally's mother with an obsequious "Madam," he now vows to Hally, "If you make me say it once, I'll never call you anything else again"

(625). Next, Hally repeats his father's joke about a "nigger's arse" not being "fair." Because of all the wordplay previously, there is no doubt that Sam understands the pun.

Finally, in a deft reversal of the expected dynamics of the situation, when Sam lowers his trousers to show just how "fair" his backside is, it is Sam who keeps his dignity and Hally who is made to feel ignominious. When he spits in Sam's face, desperately trying to save face and preserve his pride, Hally demeans only himself. Willie responds with "a long and heartfelt groan," an utterly appropriate response from the one character who lacks the facility with English possessed by the other two.

Sam knows that, "The face you should be spitting in is your father's" (641), and he restrains his instinct to hit Hally who is only, as Willie reminds him, "Little *white* boy. Long trousers now, but he's still little boy" (648). Sam's anger gives way to a sense of defeat and of the failure of the promise he had made to himself after carrying home Hally's drunken father—that Hally should not be ashamed of himself. Now Hally will be doubly ashamed: of his denial of his natural father and his betrayal of his surrogate one. He is ready to slink back home meekly.

Despite his previous vow, Sam addresses the boy informally: "I've got no right to tell you what being a man means if I don't behave like one myself, and I'm not doing so well at that this afternoon. Should we try again, Hally?" (655). Sam has done more than turned the other cheek. His generosity and plain humanity in offering Hally a second chance is an act of hope, not just for this black man and white boy but for all of estranged humanity.

Hally says that he oscillates "between hope and despair for this world" (175), but for the most part he manifests his despair. As the student exchanges roles with his teacher, Sam counsels him, "You don't *have* to sit up there by yourself. You know what that [whites-only] bench means now, and you can leave it any time you choose. All you've got to do is stand up and walk away from it" (661). Sam's challenge leaves Hally and the audience some hope, not of the collective consciousness and concerted action suggested by *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island*, but of the possibilities of the individual human spirit and consciousness. Having instigated a cathartic eruption, it is Hally's choice either to come of age and be initiated as a man, or to remain a boy.

Sam and Hally are not entirely reconciled, but before heading home Hally begins to rise from his absolute nadir. For the audience, the emotional ascent continues as the jukebox, the only visually exciting object in the spartan cafe, comes to life with the Maurice Sigler and Al Hoffman

song, "Little Man, You've Had a Busy Day."³ *Master Harold* opens with Sam and Willie alone on stage, and so it ends as they dance together, a final image of harmony among men. Gliding across the floor, the pair embody Sam's earlier advice: "The secret is to make it look easy. Ballroom must look happy Willie, not like hard work" (22).

The same is true of Fugard's craft in this compact, simple, and powerful drama. Following as it does the severely flawed *Aloes* and *Marigolds*, *Master Harold* is a convincing answer to those who might have predicted the erosion of Fugard's skill and power.

Fugard says of the play, "I was dealing with the last unlaidd ghost in my life, who was my father. Our relationship was as complex as Master Harold expresses it in the play. I had a resentment at his infirmity and other weakness but, as Master Harold says, 'I love him so.'" Fugard had tried before to confront the ghost of his father in *Hello and Goodbye*. Unlike Hally, or Fugard himself, Johnnie Smit never emancipates himself, never achieves emotional autonomy, and never finds his own identity. Instead of leaving his own father for university, Fugard says, "I could have been weak enough to decide not to go." Instead of going to railroad school, Johnnie "stopped, thought about his father, and went back. And that's a mistake."⁴ Johnnie is chronologically older than Hally, but developmentally younger. In *Marigolds*, too, Fugard explores a variation on the adolescent-adult relationship by juxtaposing Daan's journey of self-discovery with the *rite de passage* of the abakwetha.

Fugard's father-son relationship—both in life and on stage—begins as that of every manchild, but is further complicated by the presence of two fathers: black and white, strong and weak, warm and distant, adopted and natural. The one's race and the other's infirmity are physical "liabilities" beyond control. The son feels the social prohibition against striking the biological father, even figuratively (especially since he is disabled), yet that same society fosters his trampling of the surrogate father because he is black. Hally's demand to be called "Master" is a proclamation of racial superiority, but it is also a proclamation of emancipation by an adolescent who yearns to become an adult.

In adolescence, a son realizes his full physical power at the very time his father's power begins to wane. Because Hally's father has long been a cripple, this particular pattern does not apply. (He never flew a kite with his son, let alone played ball in the backyard.) However, in most other ways Hally's struggle for maturity is prototypical. The innate power of this archetypal father-son conflict is one reason for *Master Harold's* impact.

It is not clear in his quote above which "weakness" of his father Fugard considered most disabling. He bequeathed Fugard his love of music and storytelling, but the son also "inherited" alcoholism and, for a time at least, bigotry. Fugard stopped drinking about the time he began writing *Master Harold*. And like many children, he rejected his father's politics—not to retreat as an underground revolutionary, but to step forward as an impassioned opponent of apartheid—and adopted Sam Semela's openness, compassion, and lucidity.

Parts of *Master Harold* were written at Fugard's mountain retreat in New Bethesda, four-and-a-half hours from Port Elizabeth. This little village near Middelburg, where Fugard was born, is located in the mountains behind Graaf Reinet. In 1984 Fugard purchased his burial plot there. While working on *Master Harold* in New Bethesda, he notes, "I suddenly realized that the chair I was sitting on had been in my mother's tearoom on the afternoon I was writing about. That same chair!" It was according to Fugard, "one of the easiest writing experiences I've ever had. The actual time involved was the same as for the others, but the writing did not involve any of the desperations and traumas I've taken for granted to be an inevitable part of the process." He adds, "The experience was a painful one, but the crafting aspect of it was just one of the most serene, effortless exercises I've ever experienced. . . . In the course of writing the four drafts I never tore up a single page."⁵

Fugard describes his process of writing early in his career as "pouring it out and taking on a process of reduction," but with *Master Harold*, "it was not a question of pouring, it was a question of building." As an example, he cites a sentence in the first and second drafts that read, "You should have taken his crutches away from him." In the third draft it became, "You and the nurses should have taken his crutches away from him." In the published script the sentence runs, "Then you and the nurses should have held him down and taken his crutches away from him." Fugard explains, "Now that's a radically different process to what would have happened if I had been dealing with a moment like that during *The Blood Knot*. That would have been a speech a page long. Which I would have then had to try to cut, reduce, edit, shift, and I would not have had enough sense to know how to reduce it to just one sentence. Because it is a complete picture—isn't it? In that one sentence, I now work very sparingly as a writer. Almost too sparingly I think, at times."⁶

After finishing the second draft, Fugard faced the question of where to produce the play, which, as usual, he planned to direct himself. In a letter

dated October 8, 1981 he writes, "I am going to break a past pledge and not do it in S.A. first. I won't get the actors I need here and I'm also certain that there are things in the play that will fall foul of the local censors." Fugard probably had in mind both the baring of Sam's bottom and the casting of Hally, who must look young enough to pass as a teenager, yet have the emotional range and technique of a veteran. In addition to these problems, Fugard sought a first production abroad because *Master Harold* is so introspective and personal a play: "I've always had a sense that the plays that lie behind me—*Aloes*, *Boesman*, and the others . . . that S.A. was half owner of the rights. This one belongs to me; this one's mine."⁷ Although Peter Hall offered a production at Britain's National Theatre, Fugard turned instead to Lloyd Richards and the Yale Repertory Theatre, which had presented the American premiere of *Aloes*.

When Fugard began working on the script, he assumed he could achieve the same shocking effect without actually including the spitting incident. Not until the third draft did he write, "Hally spits in Sam's face." This moment was also avoided during the first two weeks of rehearsal until Fugard took it on himself and stopped rehearsal: "I just turned quietly on Zakes (Mokae), took his head in my hands in a very loving gesture, and I just spat that face wet. I just spat it wet, and the poison was out . . . because I also went on you see."⁸ Fugard himself also demonstrated how Sam should drop his trousers.

Master Harold premiered in New Haven on March 12, 1982 with Mokae, Danny Glover as Willy, and Željko Ivanek as Hally. Jack Kroll wrote, "If there is a more urgent and indispensable playwright in world theatre than South Africa's Athol Fugard, I don't know who it could be." Three months later, after *Master Harold* had opened at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway, Frank Rich asserted, "There may be two or three living playwrights in the world who can write as well as Athol Fugard, but I'm not sure that any of them has written a recent play that can match *Master Harold*."⁹ The play received both the Drama Desk Award and the Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of 1982.

The dramaturgy of *Master Harold* is so deft that it may barely be discerned—proof in itself of its skill—yet Fugard's refined craft is present even in minor moments throughout the play. Consider the textures of this brief exchange:

HALLY: It doesn't have to be that way. There is something called progress you know, we don't exactly burn people at the stake anymore.

SAM: Like Joan of Arc.

HALLY: Correct. If she was captured today she'd be given a fair trial.

SAM: And then the death sentence.

In only a few lines, Fugard introduces the idea of progress, indicates the extent of Sam's learning, and finishes the beat with a joke on both South African justice and the idea of progress.

Fugard's contrapuntal skill is not limited to his dialogue. The rainy weather outside the cafe suggests the gloominess of Hally's mood, contrasts with the day Sam and Hally shared a kite, and, on a literal and realistic level, explains why no customers visit. Also, while the play focuses on Sam and Hally, Willie remains present even when he has nothing to say. Washing the floor on his hands and knees, his trousers rolled up like a school-boy's, he is an inescapable reminder of the role blacks are expected to play.

Critics, and Fugard himself upon occasion, have noted the slow beginning of some of his plays. It takes some time for the relationships and issues of *Master Harold* to engage also. In the meantime, however, it is energetically propelled by its humor, much of it "gentle" as Fugard predicted, but a great deal of it broad and hilarious—more so than even Fugard has realized in either his comments or his production. It is unquestionably the funniest play he has written.

When his mother died in 1980, Fugard received a warm letter of condolence from Semela although the two had not seen each other in fifteen years. *Master Harold* bears the dedication "for Sam and H.D.F." Shortly before the scheduled opening of the play in South Africa, Fugard asked John Kani to contact Semela and give him an airline ticket for the Johannesburg premiere. Kani, who was cast as Sam, "arrived at the Semela family residence to find all the furniture piled outside, as it is in the tradition of the Xhosa people when the head of a household dies."¹⁰

NOTES

¹ Raine, p. 11. Gussow, "Witness," p. 55.

² Letter to Russell Vandenbroucke, October 8, 1981.

³ As originally scripted, the song was to have been sung by Lena Horne. After Fugard learned that she had never recorded it, as he had presumed, she expressed her willingness to do so—without a fee. However, the Yale Repertory Theatre would not pay the cost of a recording session. A Sarah Vaughan recording was used instead. Fugard had hoped to use Horne's rendition as a form of gratitude both for her voice and for her praise of him when he had received a Best Play award from The New York Drama Critics' Circle for *Aloes*.

⁴ William B. Collins, "A Master's Play of Tragic Import Is Brought Here," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 21, 1982, p. 10-M. BBC, "Life and Works."

⁵ Gussow, "Witness," p. 87. Letter to Vandembroucke. "Athol Fugard and Don MacLennan," pp. 3-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷ Letter to Vandembroucke. "Masterful Fugard: Athol Fugard's *Master Harold* . . . and the boys," *Yale Reports*, 6, No. 4 (1982), p. 1.

⁸ "Athol Fugard and Don MacLennan," p. 6.

⁹ Kroll, "Masters and Servants" (rev. *Master Harold*), *Newsweek*, March 29, 1982, p. 52. Rich, "Rev. *Master Harold*," *New York Times*, May 5, 1982.

¹⁰ Joseph Lelyveld, "Master Harold Stuns Johannesburg Audience," *New York Times*, March 24, 1983, p. 22.

ALISA SOLOMON

"Look at History":

An Interview with Zakes Mokae* (1982)

Zakes, it's been a long journey for you from Soweto to New York City, from the days of developing plays with Athol in the Johannesburg ghetto to winning a Tony on Broadway in his latest play. Could you talk about that journey and your association with Fugard's work from the beginning until now?

I met Athol in the '50s when Lewis Nkosi, a writer, brought him to the place in Soweto where artists used to hang out, and left him there with me. I was playing the saxophone in those days. Somehow we got around to doing some plays just for the fun of it and because we believed in it. We founded the Rehearsal Room and did plays about the ghetto—*Nongogo* and *No-Good Friday*. The actors were not only acting, but also finding the props, building the scenery, doing whatever needed to be done. I think it was there that Athol developed his style of writing for small casts in one location. He couldn't write for a lot of people, because half the time they weren't going to show up. And we were going to be lucky to have any set at all; there weren't going to be two, or three.

* Editor's note: When this interview was first printed, in 1982, the South African government had banned production of *Master Harold* . . . and the boys.

Was that the first theater in the area?

Not really. Before us there was the Baretta Players associated with Witwatersrand University. They did an all black production of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. That was in the '40s.

Was that the first play you ever saw?

That depends on how you define a play. It was the first western play I saw, but I'd seen a lot of plays before that. Plays are integral to my background, to my culture. But we define them differently. You always hear me tell the story of how my parents don't know what it is I do because there is no word in my language for actor. The closest word is "to play." So I tell them I play and they say, "A big man like you and all you do is play?" But that's because the concept is very different in my culture. It's like going back to the Greeks where everyone participates. Birth, death, it's always a celebration in my culture and everyone takes part. In my culture the play belongs to the people. You guys talk about plays you own. One person writes them. We don't deal with that; we don't have to deal with copyrights.

Anyhow, Athol would leave sometimes, and then he'd come back with a new play. One time he came back with *The Blood Knot*. We performed the play on a hot Sunday night and it lasted more than four hours. On Monday the papers were raving about it and producers were offering to bring it to legitimate theaters, and then take it on tour. It all happened so fast the government couldn't do anything about it. So we took it on tour, Athol traveling in first class, sneaking a bottle to me through the window every time the train stopped. We were appearing together in this play, but we couldn't ride in the same car. We took *Blood Knot* to London and it was a success.

Knowing there wouldn't be many roles for me in South Africa, I stayed in England and studied acting. Athol went home and kept writing plays. Later he founded the Serpent Players with John (Kani) and Winston (Ntshona). People are more familiar with the plays he did with them. They collaborated on *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi*. And they did well with those plays. John and Winston won Tonys when they brought *Sizwe* here. But when they went back they still had to be registered as Athol's gardeners to be able to work with him. They come out here and win Tonys, but that's what they have to do there. It's how the system functions. Athol has kept writing plays, and I've kept acting, and we've kept in touch over the years. I've done *Boesman* and *Aloes*. He caught up with me last winter. I was acting in St. Louis and he came to ask me to play Sam in *Master Harold* . . . and the boys.