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A white man dressed in all black and a black man dressed in all white approach each other on a dark, deserted street. The single moment in time for which their eyes meet is the subject of Marie-Bernard Koltes' play, *In the Solitude of Cottonfields*.

The play, which debuted at [7 Stages](#) last Thursday, is a visually sparse but verbally rich examination of the perspectives, psyches, and motivations of 2 strangers that share a common, but unspoken bond. Ismail ibn Conner – who plays the Dealer, and Del Hamilton - who plays the Client, take turns delivering rhythmically poetic monologues that touch on a variety of opposing themes: light and dark, depth and height, virgin and whore. Like human embodiments of yin and yang, each man wrestles with himself, embracing both sides of the spectrum as he struggles to conceal, yet longs to reveal to the other his reason for being on this deserted street at this time of night.

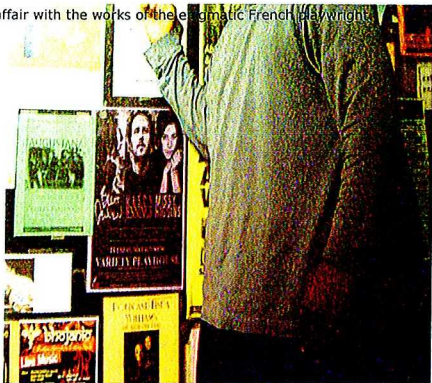
As the play unfolds, the street on which the two men encounter each other becomes an emotional and moral marketplace where the nature of the transaction can only be guessed at by both the audience and the players themselves. The effect of the characters' verbal jousting is evidenced by the transformation of their demeanors. Conner's Dealer starts out as vaguely threatening and cocky but soon becomes placating and nurturing; while Hamilton skillfully employs his stark visage and gravelly voice to morph the timid and naïve Client into a combative aggressor. The characters' interaction is a metaphor for many things, especially the interminable human paradox of wanting to have your desires met, wanting to fulfill the desires of 'Other', but being reluctant to fully express those desires for fear of retribution, refusal, or revealing some part of yourself you'd rather keep in darkness. In several of the plays 'scenes' the actors speak directly at the audience, drawing viewers into an uncomfortable space where they are directly challenged not only to embrace the material, but also to examine their own internal longings and unspoken desires.

After the show, my friend and I adjourn to [Java Lords](#), next door to trade our impressions of the play over drinks. As luck would have it, we run into Ismail Ibn Conner and stop to chat with him and get him to share his personal opinion of the production.



Conner, a native of Colorado, moved to Atlanta 8 years ago to try his hand at acting. His only training as an actor came from "watching TV and films" but his persistent appeals to the Artistic Director of 7 Stages eventually earned him a part in one of the theater's productions: Marie-Bernard Koltes' *Black Battles with Dogs*. That play would mark the beginning of Conner's love

affair with the works of the enigmatic French playwright.



"I remember when I first read the script I thought, 'This is stupid. Where's the story?'" Like *Cottonfields*, the drama and action in Koltes' other plays don't come from a story line or plot, but from lyrical dialogue layered with subtle meaning and metaphor – which can be a challenge for viewers expecting a more traditional theater experience.

"Westerners have a tendency to only interpret things intellectually. If we can't dissect something

intellectually, we dismiss it," shares Conner, who admits that this intellectual stance was the primary reason he didn't initially connect with the material. However, during a later reading of *Black Battles*, Koltes' words struck an emotional chord in him. "The next thing I knew, tears were coming from my eyes."

Intrigued by Koltes' style of writing and his treatment of issues like race and human isolation, Conner continued to study the life and works of Koltes, and developed a profound reverence for the material as well as for the man himself. After performing *Black Battles* in the States and in Europe, Conner now has the unique opportunity of working with Koltes' brother Francois in translating six of the artist's plays from their original French into American English. Conner's work is an integral part of 7 Stages' 10-year project that is focused on increasing awareness and appreciation of Koltes' work both in the U.S. and abroad.

When asked what he wants audiences to take away from *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields*, Conner at first hesitates to impose his own expectation, "Everyone will have their own interpretation of what they see." But then he adds, "I want people to leave with their humanity expanded."

In the Solitude of Cotton Fields plays through May 17 at 7 Stages Theater in Little Five Points.

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