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In the Solitude of Cotton Fields

French play puts the art of the deal under a microscope

by Curt Holman

You can say more with a silent glance or a single gesture than with any amount of words. 7 Stages' production of Bernard-Marie Koltès' *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* tests this idea by distilling all the implications contained in a brief encounter.

7 Stages artistic associate Isma'il ibn Conner translated the late French playwright's 1986 drama for its English-language world premiere. The play takes a wordless meeting between two men and puts it under a magnifying glass, the technique comparable to a frame-by-frame analysis of a short but significant piece of film. It makes great demands on its audience, but offers some recompense for your close attention.

Solitude's approach to minute details and internal monologues echoes stream-of-consciousness novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, as well as more contemporary "miniaturists" such as Nicholson Baker, whose short novel *The Mezzanine* explored the narrator's thoughts during a lunch-hour escalator ride. A writer looking at the interaction between two people could find a wealth of material in an attached couple's loving relationship, or a death struggle between two soldiers on a battlefield.

Solitude borrows imagery from such scenarios, but instead focuses on a potentially illicit transaction. The Dealer (Conner) and the Client (7 Stages artistic director Del Hamilton) approach each other at twilight on a deserted city street and speak in alternating monologues. The play never comes out and says what "merchandise" is being offered, so numerous possibilities are valid. The Dealer wears high-top tennis shoes and at times conceals his face with a hoodie, Conner's character could be a drug dealer, and the Client someone wrestling with an addiction to a controlled substance.

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MARKET FORCES: Del Hamilton (left) and Isma'il ibn Conner in *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields*

J'aime

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In the Solitude of Cotton Fields

Through May 17. \$25. 7 Stages, 1105 Euclid Ave. Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. (for additional performances, see website). 404-523-7647. www.7stages.org.

But given the depths of the desires expressed and the Client's apparent ambivalence to them, a sex transaction might be more likely. Koltès was gay and died due to complications from AIDS in 1989, so the play dates to a time when any same-sex relations (let alone prostitution) were more fraught and reliant on unvoiced agreements.

Since the details aren't spelled out, *Solitude* could hinge on the sale of practically anything. Koltès' language frequently focuses on the charged dynamics between two men at any initial meeting. At one point the Dealer calls twilight "this hour of gently growling men and animals," and a refrain in the text equates men with beasts, with violence a constant possibility. Koltès' depiction of alpha-male tension sounds the play's most powerful, lingering note.

Conner makes a forceful presence with his white suit and loud, declaiming delivery. At times he bounces a tennis ball in a sign of barely contained strength. The Dealer tries to present himself as less threatening as he touches the Client's arm and offers him a coat (some of the few things that actually happen in the action). Despite some strange, unnatural line readings, Conner's Dealer exudes the confidence of someone who knows who he is, and what the Client wants.

It's harder to get a fix on Hamilton's black-suited character, a businessman presumably out of his element on the streets. Not only are his motivations kept unclear, but the Client seems divided against himself: "I will not pay for a temptation I never had!" he insists. The Client angrily denies the possibility of kinship with the Dealer, and it's to Hamilton's credit that we suspect that the Client protests too much.

At times the play's abstract language can leave the audience befuddled, but Koltès occasionally offers vivid, specific metaphors such as the way the Dealer compares the Client's initial rebuffal to a thorn placed under a horse's saddle. Their physical movements suggest the possibilities in the men's relationship: They might stalk or dance with each other, and at one point, one actor carries the other around the performing space like a child. They could end up as intimates or enemies.

You can appreciate the actors' sustained intensity, but after about an hour, *Solitude's* speeches become so repetitive that they'll try your patience. 7 Stages' stark Samuel Beckett productions are easygoing by comparison. French director Eric Vigner uses lighting and music to alleviate the monotony and embellish the subtle difference in meanings. Pascal Noel's lighting design creates sharp shadows on the whitewashed back wall and gives the actors a cinematic glow when they lean across a central table. The music features some surprising choices when it switches from driving rhythms and ominous techno to a swoony, old-fashioned romantic soundtrack.

Conner and Hamilton both starred in 7 Stages' 2001 production of Koltès' *Black Battles with Dogs*, a colonial drama that, however dense, proved more readily accessible than *Solitude's* microscopic perspective. Remounted all over the world, *Black Battles* foreshadowed 7 Stages' new 10-year U.S. Koltès Project, which will develop English versions of Koltès' major plays translated by Conner.

7 Stages' Koltès Project sounds like an intriguing venture (Conner is working on the playwright's version of *Hamlet* next), even though the inaugural work presents such a downbeat view of human interactions. *Solitude's* motto could offer a variation on *caveat emptor*: Let the buyer *and* the seller beware.