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Small Atlanta theater launches 10- year exploration of French playwright Koltes

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ATLANTA: Two men, known to the audience only as The Dealer and The Client, meet on a street corner late at night.

" Tell me the thing that you desire and I can provide it for you," the dealer says.

Exactly what The Dealer has to offer, or what The Client might want to buy, is never made known. The Dealer, who according to the playwright' s instructions must be black, and The Client, who must be white, spend the rest of the play negotiating, threatening each other and even dancing together.

" In the Solitude of Cotton Fields," written in 1986, is the first of six plays by the late French playwright Bernard- Marie Koltes that Atlanta' s 7 Stages Theatre plans to produce during the next 10 years. It opens this weekend.

The company is using a new translation by company member Ismail ibn Conner, who also plays The Dealer.

It' s an ambitious project for 7 Stages, which has a 202- seat house and a black box that' s mostly used as rental space. A French director will be brought in for each play, beginning with Theatre de Lorient' s Eric Vigner, who is working with a team of lighting designers from France.

How can such a small company take on such a big project?

" The same question could be asked of any of our projects," said 7 Stages artistic director Del Hamilton, who plays The Client. " How do we do it in these days of declining support from corporations and foundations?"

The answer is that 7 Stages, which produced Koltes' " Black Battles With Dogs" in 2001 and took it on a European tour, has strong support from the French government and private financial sources.

" French government agencies have stepped forward and provided small grants as well as financial support," Hamilton said. Etant Donnes, the French- American fund for the performing arts, has also provided help.

For Vigner, it' s an opportunity to direct a play he admires but which is rarely done in France. " It' s important to do it in Atlanta, because of the relationship between black and white here," he said. " A black man in France, it' s not the same."

Plans call for taking the production to Europe, probably beginning in France. " It' s OK for Americans to do it in English in France. You see your culture in a mirror," Vigner said. Hamilton also hopes to take the plays to U. S. college campuses for residency programs that would include the creative teams.

Some audiences may find " Cotton Fields" a bit daunting.

" It' s not based on plot," Hamilton said. " It' s based on ideas and language. The playwright asks the audience to think about that brief moment when one first meets another person. What is the process that goes on in that split second?"

" The characters' names are Client and Dealer, so it's about the deals we make in order to build a relationship with another person."

The play was written three years before Koltes died of AIDS. Vigner sees *The Dealer*, on one level, as representing death. " The client thinks he's going from this place to that place. The Dealer tells him, ' No, you're coming to this place, and I was waiting for you.'"

Hamilton said U. S. audiences may have been turned off by previous translations of Koltes' work. " The first translations were done by English scholars. The translations sounded very British. To our ear, it didn't sound right.

" The goal is to spread the word of Koltes in Americanized translations so that his plays are warmly received in this country," Hamilton said.

Conner, who will translate all the plays in the project, said previous translations sounded as if the translators were trying to correct the author, " which I believe is a huge mistake.

" I love these lines ? ' When two men meet, they don't have any other choice than to fight.' They can deal with each other with the gentleness of fraternity or the violence of an enemy. There's nothing else."

French officials hope the project will help relations between the United States and France.

" It is our hope that this theatrical infusion will provide illuminating perspectives on French culture and spark passionate conversations among and between the countries' leading theater artists, patrons and professionals," Kareen Rispal, cultural counselor of the French embassy, said in a statement.

" The U. S. Koltes project is one of the most significant artistic partnerships between France and the U. S. in the field of contemporary theater."

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