

IN THE SOLITUDE OF COLLON FIELDS BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS ÉRIC VIGNER

With DEL HAMILTON and ISMA'IL IBN CONNER

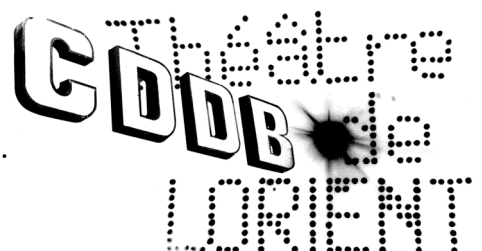
Text BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS
Translation ISMA'IL IBN CONNER
Direction, Set & Costumes design.....ÉRIC VIGNER
LightPASCAL NOËL
Sound OTHELLO VILGARD
Assistant to the directorCYRIL BRODY
Costumes assistant..... JOHANNA SCHMINK
Trainee TURNER SCHOFIELD

Production : 7 Stages Theater/CDDB – Théâtre de Lorient, Centre Dramatique National.
With support from François Koltès, Festival d'Avignon, High Museum, Alliance Française in
New York. Sponsored by the Cultural Service of the Consulate General of France in Atlanta
and Etant donnés: the French-American Fund for Performing Arts, a program of FACE and the
Centre National des Écritures du Spectacle, La Chartreuse.

Created April 26th, 2008 – 7 Stages Theater – Atlanta
World premiere of the American translation

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LETTER OF INTENTION

There is no love, there is no love.

I am writing from Atlanta in the spring of 2008, where I am directing *IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS*, play by BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS, newly translated, with two American actors, one black and one white. Atlanta as it is epitomized by CNN and Coca Cola, in the very heart of the Old South of blacks and memories of slavery, where the cotton fields are still murmuring today, forty years after the assassination of MARTIN LUTHER KING.

Before I left, my friend the dramatist RÉMI DE VOS and I had completed the adaptation of *OTHELLO*. Six months of unrelenting work, from English into French, trying to stick as closely as possible to the language of SHAKESPEARE and to write a version that would fit the stage and accommodate the actors.

Turning from KOLTÈS to SHAKESPEARE, caught in the wickerwork of languages, I read *OTHELLO* in the light of *LA SOLITUDE: Two men who meet don't have any other choice but to fight, with the violence of the enemy or the gentleness of fraternity* (BMK).

More than ever before I became aware of how much the two plays have in common, how, no matter in what way you stage them, the outcome will merely be a variation on an invisible construct, a story produced by coincidences, choice and links picked up here and there. Over the centuries, the texts speak to each other as in a dialogue. Othello's famous lines, *this sorrow's heavenly: It strikes where it doth love*, are echoed, I feel, by the last words of *LA SOLITUDE*: ... *There is no love, there is no love.* (BMK)

Like *LA SOLITUDE*, *OTHELLO* is a story of human beings, with Iago and Othello forming the principal couple. It is between these two that the battle is fought. *OTHELLO* is a piece about war – the war between Venice and the Turks, a war of conquest fought over the Mediterranean, a war of religion between East and West, a war that is waged against oneself and against the other, in which the other becomes a foreigner whom it behooves to annihilate. The piece goes beyond Iago's personal and subconscious scheme starting with his cry of pain about the injustice he has suffered when Othello does not make him his lieutenant.

It is a play about contamination and doubt. Certainty, the good order of things, logic – the values which form the basis on which society can work smoothly – all crumble under the blows of the undercover war, an intimate and dirty one, waged by a solitary man who has been hurt and wants to destroy the world which has inflicted this pain on him.

*Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
In following him, I follow but myself;
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end:
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.*

OTHELLO is a play of darkness in which the issue of love, desire and death wheels around in a hypnotic atmosphere, just as it does in KOLTÈS' work. We witness a revolution – like the apparent revolution of the sun around the earth – from light into darkness. Here the light is that of the Last Judgement, a black light, and Iago is the herald of Apocalypse. No pardon is to be granted, no survival.

Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

Iago is an angel of darkness, shapeless and weightless except for the shape and weight others project on him; an actor, «white space» that will accommodate any projection, and the play lays bare Othello's conscience and, on the rebound, also our own. For a short moment Iago's relentless plan sheds light on the darkness and blindness that reside in Othello's heart. For what is it that Othello, in his gloom, fails to see in himself, and that causes him to kill what he loves and, in so doing, bring Iago's scheme to fruition? Othello is hit in the very place that harbours his deepest truth. The beast to be killed is his otherness, and the otherness in himself, which is tolerated in a sort of relative peace, turns into the enemy to be eradicated once the poison of doubt takes hold of him – like the desire that hounds the Client in LA SOLITUDE.

Because of the weight of this glance upon me, the virginity in me feels suddenly raped, innocence turned to guilt, and the straight line which was supposed to carry me from one point of light to another point of light, because of you has become crooked and labyrinth obscure in the obscure territory where I got lost. (BMK)

There is no hope in this sombre play, no way out. The mercenary from afar, the *Berber stallion* used by the Republic to serve their political ends and tolerated even to the extent of acquiescence in his nocturnal rape of the virgin Desdemona, is ultimately thrown back into the chaos foreshadowed by the mysterious faint in which he falls, ravished by the poison cunningly distilled by Iago. Othello remains a stranger, the odd man out, and there is nothing, nothing at all, that could mitigate, could render more acceptable, the inexorable working of death in this play. What you see before you is a desert, nothing else.

ÉRIC VIGNER, Atlanta, April 2008

ABOUT THE SOLITUDE

Forty years after the assassination of MARTIN LUTHER KING (April 4, 1968) Director ÉRIC VIGNER, head of the CDDB-Théâtre de Lorient, National Drama Centre of Brittany (France), is staging IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS by BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS at Atlanta's 7 Stages Theater.

Moving from BMK to MLK, and from French to English, ÉRIC VIGNER undertakes to create, and give voice to a theater of art, sensitive to both the location and the text - with empathy for the deeper sense of the words and the places where they are to be produced (Atlanta), and its title (solitude, cotton fields)... To enhance the text and to better communicate it to the audience, VIGNER's mise-en-scène de-emphasizes the location and focuses on the history - or rather, the histories of BMK and MLK - and makes all the world the stage (*theatrum mundi*), calling in question the world and the dividing lines between individuals and peoples, dividing lines that still exist after the advent of civil rights, the end of segregation, or apartheid, in the United States and indeed all over the world. With IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS, Vigner throws different forms of discrimination into relief: not only violence *in* the world but also the violence *of* the world.

IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS opens with the Dealer giving vent to his suspicion of the other person, who takes the role of a Client seeking to satisfy his illicit desire in a setting of "the savage relationship between men and animals". The Dealer adds to the strangeness of their meeting by hamming shamelessly without trying to veil his hypocrisy, he affects the unctuous civility of a salesman who cynically resorts to the religious symbolism of a community of love and humility, equating nature with wildness and violence, "leaving all, animal and man, below in the street to pull at their leashes and wildly bare their teeth." From then on, the *deal* is no longer merely something that takes place on the shady side of society, but still subject to the interplay of conventions and artifice - it becomes, as such, a symbol of that society which distinguishes quite arbitrarily between right and wrong, between natural and conventional, in order to make sure that the commerce can go on "at any hour of the day or night, independent of lawful opening hours and approved places of trade, but rather at the time these places are closed."

While KOLTÈS expressly defines the deal at the beginning of his text, he leaves it to the readers, directors, spectators and critics to speculate on the object of the deal. Beyond drugs and streetwalking, pleasure and desire, the deal of IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS may have to do with a flight or even a fugue in the musical sense of the term: two men experience the desire to meet up with, and acknowledge one another, they do meet, and desire one another... This burning desire to meet and acknowledge each other, then, is about acknowledging their desire, not only desire as a game but desire-at-stake, not any sort of psychology of desire or sentiment, but desire as a stake - theatrical, musical and political.

KOLTÈS rejected any sort of sentimental interpretation: "Here, In the solitude..., you are confronted with a story about gays. So I say to myself: when will I be rid of both desire and love, in the most banal sense of the term ? No, no, there are other things, many more other things, to think of." Like the scenes of QUAI OUEST, those of IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS must not be interpreted as love scenes. "They are scenes of commercial transactions, KOLTÈS says, of deals, of traffic (...). There is no tenderness in commercial dealings, and one simply must not add anything of the sort where it is obviously lacking (...). When one attributes too much importance to love, passion, tenderness (...) one inevitably tends to belittle them and to make them look ridiculous". Thus, it must be understood that desire at the heart of a deal, affects social affairs with regard to the economic, political, historical, ethnic and cultural decisions to be taken.

IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS deliriously revolves around history, peoples, colonies, economies, cultures. "The choice of the location, says KOLTÈS in defense of his title, has to do with the work of blacks at the time of slavery." In 1978 he wrote, "When and where will a Lenin be born to point his finger at the enemy and give the exploited masses, who have been used to being exploited since the days of slavery, sufficient confidence in their power ?" The fate of black slaves on the cotton plantations of America inspired a French playwright fascinated by Africa to stigmatize the continued existence of inequality and exploitation.

With KOLTÈS and VIGNER, the ordeal of desire spans continents, political strife and social systems. The dialogue between the Dealer and his Client, then, is also a rough-and-tumble, a fight between words and bodies which amalgamate before the background of the deal, and the deal rings like the criticism, not of illegal trafficking, but of the predominant role of commerce, of official, regulated, standardized transactions, and of the line of distinction between right and wrong, the legality of the market and what it suppresses in order to work more smoothly.

When the Market takes the place of "togetherness", when economic considerations predominate over politics, human relations slacken and give way to irritation and envy, family relations suffer, the dialogue between generations breaks down, brothers are no longer brothers, and friendship ceases to exist. What remains is merely "generous souls" and commodities, war-weary fighters, caricatures, and slaves, since all is disposable, and all to be had for money.

"Two men who meet by chance, writes KOLTÈS, are faced with only one choice: either they fight each other with the violence of enemies or they meet sweetly as brothers" - a striking statement which permeates the text and bursts it open, forcing readers and spectators to become aware of their own solitude, their own *malaise* amidst the culture in which they live.

"My characters (...) want to live but are not allowed to do so, says KOLTÈS, they run up against brick walls. As they struggle, they merely become aware of how hemmed in they are, how much their life is restricted by obstacles all around them. Limits, hurdles everywhere - that is what theater is about."

The Client and the Dealer are not outsiders, neither are they out of the ordinary. They are creatures of language that ÉRIC VIGNER conjures up before our eyes and ears to make us hear the rumblings of the battlefield, and to justify the words with which IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS ends: "Then, what weapon?"

STÉPHANE PATRICE, Author of KOLTÈS SUBVERSIF, Descartes & Cie, Paris, 2008

ÉRIC VIGNER

« ÉRIC VIGNER loves text. He has an absolute (physical) sense of space. This is exactly what I expect from theater. This is something I simply don't want to miss. How does he do it, this VIGNER? I don't know. But I know that this man can make his actors do anything he wants. For he has the alertness of a wild animal and the eyes of a poet. » JEAN AUDUREAU

> Native of Rennes, Brittany, ÉRIC VIGNER graduates from the University of Brittany in the visual arts. He then studies in Paris, at the National School of Theater Art and Techniques and at the National Drama Academy. His consecutive qualifications naturally lead towards directorship.

In 1990 he founds his own company SUZANNE M. ÉRIC VIGNER. His first production, LA MAISON D'OS (House of bones, 1991) by the poetic playwright ROLAND DUBILLARD, attracts the attention and is immediately invited to the prestigious PARIS AUTUMN FESTIVAL.

The driving force behind VIGNER's theater is neither ideological, nor analytical, it is poetic. He works on text as a living matter and conceives outstanding sceneries in order to subserve rare pieces of writing.

In 1993 he turns to the works of MARGUERITE DURAS and adapts her latest masterpiece LA PLUIE D'ÉTÉ (Summerrain) for the stage, which also tours to Russia (1994). It is the beginning of a deep friendship between DURAS and VIGNER who keeps exploring her universe. He directs SAVANNAH BAY at the Comédie-Française in Paris (2002) as well as at the Theatre Espace Go in Montreal (2007), presents LA BÊTE DANS LA JUNGLE (The Beast in the Jungle) at the Kennedy Center's French Festival in Washington (2004), puts on PLUIE D'ÉTÉ À HIROSHIMA (2006) for the 60th Avignon Festival (based on two of DURAS' works: 'Summerrain' and her Oscar-nominated screenplay 'Hiroshima my love'), next to directing a series of masterclasses.

Besides his commitment to contemporary playwrights - such as DUBILLARD, DURAS, MOTTON (Odéon Theatre in Paris, Paris Autumn Festival, 1995)... - for which he is awarded the honor of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des arts et des lettres in 1998, VIGNER develops a new approach of the French classics - he directs RACINE's BAJAZET (Comédie-Française, 1995), VICTOR HUGO's MARION DE LORME (Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, 1999), and MOLIÈRE's L'ÉCOLE DES FEMMES (Comédie-Française, 1999).

In 1995 ÉRIC VIGNER is appointed by the Minister of Culture to direct the CDDB-Theatre of Lorient, Centre Dramatique National. The port city of Lorient ('the Orient'), on the north-west coast of Brittany, has a glorious past due to the establishment of the French East India Company in 1666 and a transatlantic line between Lorient and New-York in the 18th century, but the city will be almost completely destroyed by the allied forces in 1944.

VIGNER's first production at the head of the CDDB- Theatre of Lorient, CORNEILLE's L'ILLUSION COMIQUE (1996), touches upon the eternal themes of the painful transition from the old to the new, the forgiveness between fathers and sons and the responsibilities we share in order to invent a future. His work is nominated to the Molière French Theater Awards. For the 50th Avignon Festival, he adapts BRANCUSI's historic lawsuit of 1928 - BRANCUSI CONTRE ÉTATS-UNIS (also presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, 1996).

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In 2007 he familiarizes a large public with the work of the emerging playwright RÉMI DE VOS and presents JUSQU'À CE QUE LA MORT NOUS SÉPARE (Till death us do part) at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in Paris (DE VOS is awarded the Foundation Diane & Lucien Barrière Theater Prize 2006).

Director ÉRIC VIGNER not only re-establishes a theater in the heart of Lorient, a city determined to work for its future, and invites renowned artists such as ALFREDO ARIAS, PETER BROOK, CLAUDE RÉGY... but he also produces and accompanies a new generation of actors, playwrights and directors, some of them being appointed to the head of theaters today. The graphic designers M/M Paris (collaborating with YAMAMOTO, PARRENO, HUYGHE, MADONNA, BJÖRK...) are in charge of the CDDB's graphic outline and realize the decor for ANTIGONA, one of the operas VIGNER directs with the conductor CHRISTOPHE ROUSSET for the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris (2004).

VIGNER develops international collaborations to last over the years, searching for a genuine mutual cultural transmission. For the National Theatre of Korea in Seoul, he adapts MOLIÈRE's and LULLY's comedy-ballet LE BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME (The bourgeois gentleman, 2004). His work is awarded the French-Korean Cultural Prize 2004 and is presented at the Opéra comique National Theatre in Paris (2006).

VIGNER continues on his chosen course as a 'pioneer', an 'inter-lingual' navigator, building on dramatic art as common ground, directing BEAUMARCHAIS' LE BARBIER DE SÉVILLE (The barber of Seville) with the actors of the National Theatre of Albania in Tirana.

After the US Koltès Project, for which he will direct IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS at the 7 Stages Theater in Atlanta (April 2008), ÉRIC VIGNER and RÉMI DE VOS sign on a new stage version of SHAKESPEARE's OTHELLO, which will be presented at the Odéon Theatre in Paris (November 2008). From French to English, English to French, VIGNER undertakes to create and give voice to a theater of art, sensitive to both the location and the text - with empathy for the deeper sense of the words and the places where they are to be produced.

THE ACTORS

> ISMA'IL IBN CONNER, The Dealer

ISMA'IL IBN CONNER has been awarded a coveted stageplay translation residency in Villeneuve-lez-Avignon, (France) at La Chartreuse - Centre National des écritures du spectacle for 2008. The basis of this residency is to continue translation work on *DANS LA SOLITUDE DES CHAMPS DE COTON* (In the Solitude of Cotton Fields) and begin work on *LE JOUR DES MEURTRES* (KOLTÈS' version of *HAMLET*). ISMA'IL also performed a sneak preview/staged reading of his translation, *IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS* at the 2007 TCG Conference for The Global Tapas program in Minneapolis, Minn. Other projects include *BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS* at the Festival d'Avignon, France and the Hellenic Festival in Athens, Greece. *BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS* debuted at 7 Stages in 2001 and subsequently toured France (Lorient, Créteil, and Clermont-Ferrand). *BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS* was in Chicago for the "Playing French Festival" at the Athenaeum. ISMA'IL reprises his role as Alboury in *BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS* to be performed in May 2008 in Orléans, France at the Centre Dramatique National, as well as Anvers, Belgium in January 2009. ISMA'IL is an Artistic Associate with 7 Stages Theatre and creator of 7 Stages' resident artist ensemble Group 7 (G7).

> DEL HAMILTON, The Client

As co-founder of 7 Stages, DEL HAMILTON has been a part of the company since its inception in 1979. As Artistic Director, he has directed over 30 productions at 7 Stages, including *HUSH: COMPOSING BLIND TOM WIGGINS*, *ATHOL FUGARD's MY CHILDREN! MY AFRICA!*, *SUSAN YANKOWITZ's NIGHT SKY*, *MACBETH*, *THE TEMPEST*, numerous plays by SAM SHEPARD. He has also acted in such notable plays as *BECKETT's WAITING FOR GODOT*, *CARMEN KITTEL* by GEORG SEIDEL, *DER PARK* by BOTHO STRAUSS, *FUGARD's A PLACE WITH THE PIGS*, *DER FROSCH* by HERBERT ACHTERNBUSCH, and the original production of *JIM GRIMSLEY's MR. UNIVERSE*. DEL HAMILTON directed a very successful production of *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST* at Teatr Nowy in Poznan, Poland, and he has acted and directed at theaters in Atlanta, New York, London, and Amsterdam. DEL HAMILTON is the author of several plays and has received numerous awards, including the 1994 Mayor's Fellowship in the Arts and the 1992 Arts Alive Excellence in the Arts Award. He was named Best Director for 2002 by Atlanta Magazine.

PRESS CULS [1]

> AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE
"The KOLTÈS mystique"
by RANDY GENER, May 1, 2008

Making his metaphysical French dramas suited to American ears requires actors, not literary translators.

The French dramatist BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS was the SARAH KANE of his day. A white, homosexual European dying of AIDS, he was the uncompromising dark angel who led audiences along the unlit back alleyways of alterity. He was a stage poet of estrangement. His bleak, elliptical, formally rhetorical works—a blend of casual-brutal vernacular and shards of highly stylized monologues—display sympathy for characters on the periphery of conventional society. KOLTÈS did not commit suicide (as KANE did), but the coincidence of his youthful promise and his early death in 1989, at the height of the plague (AIDS claimed him at a Paris hospital at age 41), raised a certain curiosity about him as a lone wolf, a guardian of the underdog.

A cult-like reverence has also formed around his work. Touted as the true spiritual heir of SAMUEL BECKETT, JEAN COCTEAU and JEAN GENET, KOLTÈS is today phenomenally popular in continental Europe - he is, according to Le Monde, "a classic of our time, who since 1990 is the French author most performed abroad." Paradoxically, America has never quite cottoned to KOLTÈS, who remains virtually unknown even in the British theatre, where several English translations of his major plays have surfaced.

Save for rare U.S. outings and a 2003 KOLTÈS Festival in downtown New York, this Anglo-American neglect is doubly ironic, because in 1988 KOLTÈS adapted into French SHAKESPEARE's THE WINTER'S TALE, and he was completely enamored with American pop culture, particularly its charismatic, usually anti-heroic icons, such as BOB MARLEY, BRUCE LEE and ROBERT DE NIRO. His Paris studio was plastered with posters of JAMES DEAN, the young MARLON BRANDO and the New York City piers, and he professed a love for FAULKNER.

Audiences in other cultures and foreign languages were, in fact, the first to embrace KOLTÈS during his life. Three of his major plays debuted in translation in New York City, Berlin and Holland before ever being presented in France, beginning in 1982 when FRANÇOISE KOURILSKY of the now-defunct Ubu Repertory Theatre staged BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS (COMBAT DE NÈGRE ET DE CHIENS) at the La Mama Annex under the title COME DOG, COME NIGHT.

Near the end of his days, KOLTÈS received a few significant French productions - notably with director PATRICE CHÉREAU, who staged COMBAT in 1983 and DANS LA SOLITUDE DES CHAMPS DE COTON (IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS) in 1987 in the industrial city of Nanterre - but France was largely impervious to KOLTÈS until after he had already received international recognition.

Deemed irreclaimably French, KOLTÈS's works remain bottled inside the peculiarly American politics of Otherness: rhapsodic but oblique, obtuse or enigmatic in their resolute anti-naturalism, teeming with crystal-clear talk but putting forward impenetrable thoughts. Fortunately not everybody has fully sworn in on the bible of Koltèsian strangeness. Reeling from the recent international successes of its own BLACK BATTLES, staged by young and gifted Frenchman ARTHUR NAUZYCIEL, Atlanta's 7 Stages is working closely with KOLTÈS's older brother FRANÇOIS KOLTÈS, who manages the writer's estate, to create new American translations of six of KOLTÈS's plays: DANS LA SOLITUDE DES CHAMPS DE COTON, LE JOUR DES MEURTRES DANS L'HISTOIRE D'HAMLET (THE DAY OF THE DEATHS IN THE HISTORY OF HAMLET),

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SALLINGER, a double bill of LA NUIT JUSTE AVANT LES FORÊTS (THE NIGHT JUST BEFORE THE FORESTS) and TABATABA, and QUAI OUEST (QUAY WEST). Over a 10-year period, one will be mounted every other year in Atlanta by a notable French director.

According to 7 Stages artistic director DEL HAMILTON, the U.S. KOLTÈS Project hopes to spur "renewed interest and genuine understanding" in KOLTÈS by creating new American-tempered versions of his texts, as opposed to using existing translations which "sound too British to American ears." In an intriguing twist, the translation team does not follow the template of engaging a writer who doesn't know the original language and a linguist (usually an academic) who does. Instead, the project is led by an actor, ISMA'IL IBN CONNER, who speaks French and has been consulting with FRANÇOIS KOLTÈS for the express purpose of adhering to the dramatist's singular writing style. Both men intend to publish these new American-English translations, in cooperation with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, and the elder KOLTÈS is going to produce a documentary film chronicling the entire artistic process.

The U.S. KOLTÈS Project took root this past summer when 7 Stages revived its searing 2001 BLACK BATTLES, which it had co-produced with director ERIC VIGNER, CDDB-Théâtre de Lorient, National Drama Centre.

CONNER, a 7 Stages artistic associate who portrayed the mysterious black man in BLACK BATTLES, became entranced by the process of translating KOLTÈS not as a literary endeavor but as an acting challenge. "It's a very rapid way of going through the line instead of adding emotional or psychological values to sentences or the entire piece. BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS's theatre is like a train barreling through, keeping its emphasis on language, and yet it haunts you", CONNER posits.

KOLTÈS's protagonists, the French critic PATRICE PAVIS rightly states, "are not concrete characters engaged in dramatic situations but logical abstractions whose role it is to mark the progression of a line of argument." So by insisting on a play-by-play approach, 7 STAGES's translation project seeks to uncover the layers of enigma that wrap KOLTÈS's metaphysical dramatic strategies and unravel, through practical application, how the American landscape, particularly New York, haunts and infuses his works with its liminal presence.

KOLTÈS felt deeply at odds with himself about being white and French. This disposition is made stranger by a rough-hewn dialectical style that sounds peculiar even to French ears. "A French language which has been re-written and corrected-colonized-by a foreign culture," KOLTÈS said, "would gain a new dimension and richness of expression in the same way that a classical statue without a head or limbs is made beautiful by their very absence." He may be the dramaturge français par excellence, but in a profound way - as this 7 STAGES initiative may ultimately show - KOLTÈS has never truly belonged to France.

PRESS CULS [2]

> BACK STAGE

"Atlanta theater begins 10-year project on French playwright"

by LEONARD PALLATS, April 24, 2008

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 KOLTÈS that Atlanta's 7 Stages Theater 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 director ERIC VIGNER, head of Brittany's National Drama Centre, the CDDB-Theatre of Lorient, who is working with a French team and lighting designer.

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 KOLTÈS' BLACK BATTLES WITH DOGS in 2001 and took it on a European tour, has strong support from the French government and private financial sources.

For director ÉRIC VIGNER, head of the National Drama Centre of Brittany, the CDDB-Theatre of Lorient, 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.

KOLTÈS, who was born in 1948 and died of AIDS in 1989, had strong left-wing political views, and the play could be interpreted as depicting the collapse of capitalism. He was influenced by the absurdists, and had a great affinity with minorities.

HAMILTON said U.S. audiences may have been turned off by previous translations of KOLTÈS' 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 KOLTÈS in Americanized translations so that his plays are warmly received in this country," HAMILTON said.

CONNER, "I love these lines - 'Two men who meet don't have any other choice but to fight, with the violence of the enemy or the gentleness of fraternity.' 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 theatre artists, patrons and professionals," KAREEN RISPAL, cultural counselor of the French embassy, said in a statement. "The U.S. KOLTÈS PROJECT is one of the most significant artistic partnerships between France and the U.S. in the field of contemporary theatre."

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PRESS CULS [3]

> CREATIVE LOAFING ATLANTA

"French play puts the art of the deal under a microscope"

by CURT HOLMAN, April 30, 2008

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.

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). 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.

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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.

French director ÉRIC VIGNER, head of the National Drama Centre of Brittany, the CDDB-Theatre of Lorient, uses lighting and music to embellish the subtle difference in meanings. PASCAL NOËL'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 by OTHELLO VILGARD features some surprising choices when it switches from driving rhythms and ominous techno to a swoony, old-fashioned romantic soundtrack. SOLITUDE's motto could offer a variation on caveat emptor. Let the buyer *and* the seller beware.

PRESS CULS [4]

> SOUTHERN VOICE

by RYAN LEE, April 18, 2008

Atlanta's Theatre Scene is about to score a major coup as 7 Stages prepares to bring the work of one of France's most acclaimed contemporary playwrights to Little Five Points. IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS, one of the final plays written by gay Frenchman BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS, premieres at 7 Stages April 24 after more than a decade of work to secure and translate the moving piece.

Since his AIDS-related death in 1989, KOLTÈS has posthumously ascended to upper echelon of French playwrights and flirted with international acclaim. His plays have been produced in the United States before, but they relied on translations into what's known as British English, which didn't make them the best fit for U.S. audiences.

"The owner of the rights to KOLTÈS' plays, his brother, FRANÇOIS KOLTÈS, feels that these plays don't capture the fascination that the author had with culture in the United States, especially western films", says DEL HAMILTON, artistic director of 7 Stages.

7 Stages is the first American theatre to showcase the new translation of KOLTÈS' IN THE SOLITUDE OF COTTON FIELDS, and the theatre's artistic associate ISMA'IL IBN CONNER is playing an integral role in adapting KOLTÈS' work for English-speaking audiences across the globe. "There's a rhythm to it, that's akin to jazz or akin to rap. There's something about it, this musicality in the language that draws you in, makes you feel it, sense it, and be alive in a way", CONNER says, "The existing translation, to me, it didn't capture the musicality - it was a completely different play".

HAMILTON first caught wind of KOLTÈS' rising star while travelling in Berlin, where he heard about a dynamic young writer in Paris. The two spoke over the phone and agreed to meet at KOLTÈS' home, but the French playwright was too sick for company by the time HAMILTON arrived.

"Like so many people from the early days of the epidemic, he didn't want to talk about his health", HAMILTON recalls. "And yet, he couldn't help but talk about it because, of course, it affected how he thought, how he felt, whether he could go out and get a croissant, or if he had to stay in the house."

Gay themes were not a major part of KOLTÈS' work, but his sexual orientation undeniably influenced his writing.

"His plays, I think, reveal a kind of sensitivity to themes that are of appeal to homosexuals, but his plays are about the larger questions of existence", HAMILTON says.

In SOLITUDE, KOLTÈS explores the nano-second two men, a black man and white man, meet for a business transaction. It remains unclear exactly what is being sold and purchased, and the play uses the interaction to look at death, capitalism and race.

"It's very important to be here, I think about the history of Atlanta, the geographic situation, the cultural situation..." says acclaimed French director ÉRIC VIGNER, head of Brittany's National Drama Centre, the CDDB-Theatre of Lorient, who was brought to 7 Stages to direct the show.

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