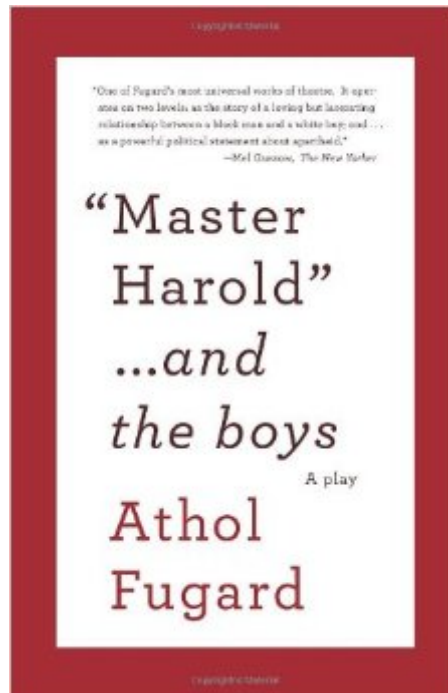


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Master Harold And The Boys: A Play (Vintage International)



Synopsis

This play about a young white boy and two African servants is at once a compelling drama of South African apartheid and a universal coming-of-age story. Originally produced in 1982, it is now an acknowledged classic of the stage, whose themes of injustice, racism, friendship, and reconciliation traverse borders and time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Set in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1950, this powerful three-character play considers the interwoven relationships of young Harold (Hally), the seventeen-year-old son of the white proprietor of a tea room, and two of the African men who have worked there for years. Hally, unable to depend on his alcoholic father, now living in an institution, has always depended on Sam, the waiter, for guidance and knowledge about the real world. They share a long history in which Sam has been very much a father substitute for Hally, who has always shown him respect. Willie, the custodian, who also looks to Sam for guidance, plans to participate, along with Sam, in a ballroom dancing competition in two weeks. For them, dancing "is beautiful because that is what we want life [in South Africa] to be like." In real life, however, "none of us knows the steps...we're bumping into each other all the time." As the play progresses, the three men reminisce, talk about their ideas of what constitutes a great hero, and show their easy relationship with each other. A phone call announcing that Hally's father is being released from the hospital upsets the equilibrium, however. Hally, morose and worried about the future, fears that his father will once again destroy his world. Taking out his

anger on Sam and Willie, he tears at their dreams regarding the dancing contest, mocking their goals and becoming cynical about what the contest means to them. As his frustration grows, Hally hurts them as he has been hurt by his father, demanding ultimately that both men call him "Master Harold."

Set in 1950s South Africa, this short one-act play packs a lot of power. The play starts fairly slowly, building the scene and allowing the reader to get to know its three characters: the teenage Hally, who's white, and Sam and Willie, the two black men who work in Hally's mother's restaurant. Willie is a less developed character than the other two; he is a simple man who is thick-headed and abusive toward his girlfriend. More central to the play is the complex relationship between Hally and Sam, who are in a sense opposites--Hally is well-educated but arrogant, while Sam lacks formal education but is humble and wise. Sam has been a lifelong fixture in Hally's life, essentially raising Hally while his father spent his days drinking. Beneath their dynamic relationship is an undercurrent of racial tension, which builds to a powerful climax at the play's end. Much of the play's effectiveness owes to its portrayal of the subtleties of racism. It is clear that Hally views himself as an enlightened person; he espouses lofty ideals, tutors Sam in geography, and prides himself on the taboo friendship he had with the two black men as a child. When Sam finally gets him to take an interest in his passion of ballroom dancing, Hally seems to congratulate himself for finding some value in what he calls "the release of primitive emotions through movement" in a "primitive black society." Yet in his smugness, Hally is oblivious to what's really going on. For all his talk of the need for "progress," he is unwilling to take personal responsibility for it, resigning himself instead to waiting for the next great social reformer to come along. He is condescending toward Sam and fails to realize he has anything to learn from the older man.

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