

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

In Santa Cruz Shakespeare's brilliant 'Master Harold,' superb performances deliver devastating truths



BY JANA MARCUS

September 12, 2025

Gift this article



Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Master Harold' ... and the Boys" is both intimate and explosive. What begins with dancing and banter unravels into a devastating portrait of racism, betrayal and moral choice. With five-star performances, this is a must-see.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare closes its season in the Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park with Athol Fugard's "Master Harold' ... and the Boys"—a searing three-character drama that lands with quiet ferocity.

Fugard's play is widely regarded as one of the most significant anti-apartheid dramas of the 20th century. Drawing from his own childhood experiences, Fugard exposes the insidious ways systemic racism infects personal relationships, even in the seemingly safe space of friendship.

The play starts with dancing and light-hearted banter inside a modest South African tea room on a quiet rainy day in 1950. The employees, Sam (Corey Jones) and Willy (Elliot Sagay), are mopping floors while practicing dance steps for an upcoming ballroom competition. Their camaraderie is infectious — a vision of connection and humanity in a place where oppression lurks just outside the door.

When Hally (Nick Rossi), the white teenage son of the tea shop's owner, arrives, the lively mood continues. For a while, the audience is lulled into the comfort of storytelling and laughter — a teenager and the two men who helped raise him. Hally and Sam reminisce about afternoons flying a homemade kite. The memory becomes a fragile symbol of connection and possibility, much like the laughter that fills the room. But Fugard never lets us forget that what lies beneath the small talk is a simmering, volatile cocktail of power, prejudice and painful truth that hits with full force.

When Hally learns that his disabled, alcoholic father is coming home from the hospital, his frustration boils over. That anger, too dangerous to aim at his father, turns toward Sam. The mood shifts in an instant as Hally lashes out, asserting the hierarchy he has inherited. "You're only a servant in here," he spits. And then, the demand that gives the play its title: "Call me Master Harold."

In this brilliant production, the moment lands like a blow to the gut. It is not simply a demand for respect; it is the crushing reminder of the power structure that governs the characters' world. The boy who once looked up to Sam now weaponizes the very system that dehumanizes him. The audience feels the silence that follows — Sam's wounded dignity, Willy's stunned helplessness, and Hally's hollow attempt at control.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz Shakespeare
What: Athol Fugard's "Master Harold' ... and the Boys"
When: Through Sept. 20
Where: The Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Rd., Santa Cruz
Tickets: santacruzshakespeare.org or 831-460-6399

In an instant, the bond we believed in—the friendship between boy and man, the surrogate father-son tenderness — is fractured. Rossi makes Hally's transformation chilling, his boyish charm collapsing into arrogance. Jones meets that cruelty with silence so heavy it feels unbearable, carrying the weight of betrayal in his stillness.

Rebecca Haley Clark directs this production with sensitivity, guiding her actors into performances that feel both grounded and transcendent, allowing Fugard's words and the actors' artistry to dominate.

The performances by these actors are masterful. Corey Jones gives a towering, nuanced performance as Sam, the heart and conscience of the play. He exudes warmth and patience, guiding not only Willy through his dance steps but Hally through the steps of growing up. Jones embodies dignity, even when humiliated. Every moment of his characterization of Sam is imbued with breathtaking subtlety and elegance.

Elliot Sagay's Willy injects humor and humanity into the story. At first, he seems to provide comic relief, but as the play unfolds, his vulnerability surfaces. Willy's struggles — his reliance on Sam, his desire for respect — mirror the larger injustices around him.

Nick Rossi shoulders the difficult task of portraying Hally, a character who shifts from a likable teenager to a cruel oppressor in the span of one afternoon. His glorious performance captures that contradiction — the boy's fragility alongside his venom. Rossi never lets the audience forget that Hally is both a victim of his own upbringing and a perpetrator of its cruelty.

The production design reinforces the story's authenticity and atmosphere. Scenic designers Michael Schweikardt and Bennett Seymour frame the tea room with restrained detail, allowing the performances to dominate. B. Modern's costumes capture the period with understated precision.

CLOSING THIS WEEKEND

All About Theatre delivers energetic take on provocative teen musical 'Spring Awakening' →

At the same time, Luke Shepherd's sound design and compositions set the mood beautifully — especially the opening, which begins with Rossi himself on trumpet before blending seamlessly into a jazz standard of the era. Voice and speech coach David Morden deserves recognition for guiding the actors to authentic South African accents, which add beautiful texture to the performances.

The play's closing moments are devastating in their clarity. After the verbal blows and betrayals, Sam again reminds Hally of the day they flew the kite — a fragile symbol of freedom that had once lifted them both above their circumstances — and of a park bench marked "Whites Only." That bench becomes a metaphor for the choices Hally faces as he grows into adulthood.

"You have a choice," Sam tells him. "You can stand up from that bench and walk away from it." It is not just a line of dialogue, but a moral challenge — from a man who has endured injustice, to a boy who is on the verge of becoming either a tyrant or a human being. Jones delivers it with quiet intensity, making it less a lecture and more a gift. And yet, we feel the unbearable weight of Hally's silence in response.

When Fugard first staged "Master Harold' ... and the Boys" in 1982, apartheid still gripped South Africa, and the play was explosive in its critique. Four decades later, apartheid is gone, but the play resonates just as urgently. It is no longer only a window into South Africa's past — it is a mirror reflecting ongoing struggles with systemic racism, displaced anger and the dangers of silence.

Theater at its best doesn't just entertain; it asks us to reckon with what we see. "Master Harold' ... and the Boys" is precisely that kind of theater. It begins with laughter, lulls us into a state of comfort, and then pulls the rug out, forcing us to confront the painful truths beneath. As compelling as it is heartbreaking, the choice Sam offers Hally is, ultimately, the same one offered to us all: What kind of people will we choose to be?

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's production doesn't just honor Fugard's text — it brings it to life again, making it urgent and necessary. With Rebecca Haley Clark's clear direction, the stellar performances of Jones, Rossi and Sagay, it is nothing short of magnificent. One of the best moments of theater in recent memory. Don't miss it before it closes on Sept. 20.



Santa Cruz Shakespeare's production doesn't just honor Fugard's text — it brings it to life again, making it urgent and necessary. With Rebecca Haley Clark's clear direction, the stellar performances of Jones, Rossi and Sagay, it is nothing short of magnificent. One of the best moments of theater in recent memory. Don't miss it before it closes on Sept. 20.