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APRIL 13, 2012

## 'The Whipping Man' gets taut, atmospheric production at Center Stage



There is always something new to learn about the Civil War and the struggle for this country's soul.

A just-out book, for example, examines a little-known order in 1862 issued by Gen. Ulysses Grant, expelling Jews from territories in Tennessee and two other states. The fact that the edict was quickly rescinded by President Lincoln hardly lessens the chilling nature of the incident.

And consider "The Whipping Man," a play by Matthew Lopez that had a well-received run Off Broadway last year.

Lopez takes as his starting point another little-discussed aspect of the Civil War — the fact that some Southern Jews were slaveholders, and the likelihood that their slaves adopted the Jewish faith.

The play, which has received a taut, atmospheric production from Center Stage, seizes on this intriguing footnote to put an almost dizzying spin on the issues of bondage and freedom. There may be a question of how much historical weight is behind the idea, but the theatrical result is quite intriguing.

The scene is Richmond, April 1865, just after Lee's surrender. Passover is about to begin, and ...

an event at a theater up in Washington is about to happen.

Three people return to a once-grand house — Caleb DeLeon, a badly wounded Jewish Confederate soldier, son of the owner; and two now former slaves, Simon and John, who toiled for years in that place and became practicing Jews.

The tables having turned inside the war-battered, rain-drenched mansion (wonderfully evoked by scenic designer Neil Patel), Simon is now in the head-of-household position, Caleb more of a housemate. John has quickly moved from subservient to assertive and risky.

All three men still have much to fear, as it happens, and much to regret. There are private demons inside their heads, unknown threats outside the door. Perspectives have shifted and will shift some more. (When Simon announces, "The President's dead," Caleb replies: "Which?")

The DeLeon home itself is haunted by ugly doings behind a veneer of gentility, and the shadow of the unseen title character — the man whose whipping skills were sought out by the patriarch whenever his slaves made him cross.

This scenario is extraordinary from all angles. The sight of freshly emancipated men holding a religious ceremony commemorating the delivery of enslaved Israelites from Egypt cannot help but strike chords as ironic as they are poignant. (At this Seder, hardtack substitutes for the matzo, collard greens for the bitter herbs.)

### About Tim Smith

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., I couldn't help but develop a keen interest in politics, but music, theater and visual art also proved great attractions. Music became my main focus after high school. I thought about being a cocktail pianist, but I hated taking requests, so I studied music history instead, earning a B.A. in that field from Eisenhower College (Seneca Falls, N.Y.) and an M.A. from Occidental College (Los Angeles). I then landed in journalism. After freelancing for the Washington Post and others, I was classical music critic for the Sun-Sentinel in South Florida, where I also contributed to NPR. I've written for the New York Times, BBC Music Magazine and other publications, and I'm a longtime contributor to Opera News. My book, *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music* (Perigee, 2002), can be found on the most discerning remainder racks.

I joined the Baltimore Sun as classical music critic in 2000 and, in 2009, also became theater critic, giving me the opportunity to annoy a whole new audience. In 2010, my original Clef Notes blog expanded to encompass a theatrical component — how could I resist calling it Drama Queens? I hope you'll find both sides of this blog coin worth exploring and reacting to; your own comments are always welcome and valued (well, most of them, at least).

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Caleb's discomfort during all of this says much, too, and not just in the context of 1865. The play obviously resonates with the whole complex history of relations between blacks and Jews over the years, the common threads of struggle and transformation, the lingering suspicions and resentments.

The connection to our own day is further driven home by the decidedly contemporary tone of Lopez's dialogue. John, in particular, often speaks with an urban jive that doesn't seem entirely mid-19th century.



Any anachronistic flavor is much easier to digest than the way the plot unfolds. Lopez packs in a few too many dirty secret-spilling passages, most of them in the closing minutes of each act, when things turn melodramatic or trite.

As a result, one of the questions during the Seder scene in "The Whipping Man" might be: Why isn't this play even more different from all other plays?

It's disappointing to recognize a rather conventional trajectory emerging after a powerful double shock at the start — first, being introduced to the unusual setting and situation; then quickly being confronted with the graphic depiction of an amputation. (The faint of heart may want to recall those immortal words from "Dixie": "Look away, look away.")

There should be bigger payoff as "The Whipping Man" develops, something to leave you a little more surprised and moved. There's too strong a hint of a TV potboiler here, right down to what could be nicely-timed stops for commercial breaks.

Still, there's much to be said for the way the play shines a light on a part of our difficult history and the continuing ramifications. It's well worth being reminded, as Simon says, that "there's more than one way a man can be a slave."

Astutely directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah in his first staging since being named Center Stage artistic director, the cast makes an admirable effort to get at the heart of the matter.

Kevyn Morrow's conveys the mix of noble, humble and stubborn qualities in Simon, an illiterate man who speaks plainly and well, who wears his scars with dignity and still believes totally in the God of Abraham ("You lose faith when you stop asking questions").

In a beautifully layered portrayal, Morrow makes the most of such moments as Simon quietly asserting himself by serving John before Caleb, or enthusiastically reciting the Passover prayers in between bursts of singing "Go Down, Moses," which takes on a whole new resonance.

Johnny Ramey does vividly detailed work as the volatile John, who can jump from courageous — he once ran an underground library, and he's fine with rummaging through abandoned Richmond dwellings — to timorous in a flash.

As Caleb, Michael Micalizzi has the unenviable task of being confined to a recumbent position for most of the play. He tends to stick to one tone as well. More nuance and depth would give his performance a lift.

David Burdick's costumes and Michelle Habeck's moody lighting effectively complement the fine set, but operatic downpours and thunder verge on overkill after a while.

"The Whipping Man" may not fulfill all the promise of the premise, but this production certainly serves the material well. And, in the end, the experience leaves just enough of a sting.

**The production runs through May 13.**

PHOTOS BY RICHARD ANDERSON

Posted by **Tim Smith** at 11:30 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

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