



A Potent WHIPPING MAN

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by Brent Englar



Michael Whittier and Ronan Moran in CENTERSTAGE's production of *The Whipping Man* by Matthew Lopez. Directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah. Photo © Richard Anderson.



Michael Whittier, Ronan Moran, and Jimmy Runyan in CENTERSTAGE's production of *The Whipping Man* by Matthew Lopez. Directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah. Photo © Richard Anderson.

In an article titled "Great Expectations" in the April issue of *Urbanite*, the performer, playwright, and director [Kwame Kwei-Armah](#)

outlined his philosophy of theatre "as a place of entertainment but also as a civic powerhouse ... a place you go to discuss, think, ruminate, and articulate." Articles and quotes such as these have made Kwei-Armah a source of palpable excitement since he assumed the post of artistic director at

Center Stage last summer. For his first directing credit since taking charge, Kwei-Armah selected *The Whipping Man*, [Matthew Lopez's](#) 2006 play about Jewish slaveholders and slaves in the aftermath of the Civil War. With this production, which opened two weeks ago (I apologize for the lateness of my review), Kwei-Armah does more than promise compelling theatre: he delivers.

In his program notes, Lopez writes that his inspiration for *The Whipping Man* came from the historical coincidence that the Confederacy surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865 the day before that year's Passover began. Thus, "as Jews across the nation were ... commemorating their ancestors' freedom from bondage, a new kind of liberation was occurring all around them." From this irony Lopez imagined Caleb DeLeon, a young captain in the Confederate army who, several days after Appomattox, returns to his family's estate in Richmond with a gangrenous leg and a shameful secret. The only people remaining to care for him are Simon and John, the DeLeons' longtime (and now ex-) slaves.

So far, this sketch could serve countless post-Civil War dramas. The most obvious twist in Lopez's play is that Caleb, Simon, and John are Jews. The DeLeons raised their slaves to share their faith, and Caleb—like his father before him, we assume—takes reflexive pride in their reputations as "good" masters. (Mrs. DeLeon even briefly taught John to read, an education he continued in secret.) Yet as the play's title suggests—and the slaves' backs make plain—pride is empty and goodness corrupted where one human owns another. Debates about the nature of family and faith and the responsibilities of man to God and God to man fill the theatre, and John and Simon more than hold their own.

Yet ultimately *The Whipping Man* turns less on questions of faith—whether specific to Judaism or

more general—than on the responsibilities of man to man and brother to brother. Such conversations are inevitable when contemplating the Civil War, but at Center Stage we listen anew. To bind together his rich backstories and ruminative speeches, Lopez has crafted a taut plot lightened with unexpected bursts of humor, and Kwei-Armah finds the right pace for each scene, utilizing silence and stillness as effectively as sound and fury.

The performances are excellent. Michael Micalizzi's Caleb spends much of the play in extreme pain, both physical and psychological; Micalizzi simulates these torments convincingly and, in quieter moments, finds an affecting balance between Caleb's baser and nobler instincts. John battles similar demons. In many respects, he and Caleb are mirror images—"two peas in a pod," Simon repeatedly observes—and Johnny Ramey endows the former slave with an outward confidence that belies his churning psyche; in Ramey's every gesture we sense John's ambivalence not only to Caleb but to freedom itself.

The play's center, though, belongs to [Kevyn Morrow](#)'s Simon, one of the most charismatic and deeply moral characters I have met in some time. Blessed with those tangible and intangible qualities that combine to form presence, Morrow commands the stage whether striding across it with a rifle or conducting an improvised Seder from a dilapidated chair. Though both Caleb and John burn under Simon's unyielding gaze, they cannot escape it for long, nor can they avoid his questions.

The production team—scenic designer [Neil Patel](#), costume designer [David Burdick](#), lighting designer [Michelle Habeck](#), and sound designer [Shane Rettig](#)—has built an exquisitely detailed Southern ruin, down to the aging carpets that release clouds of dust when unrolled. Rain pours down the windows outside and through a gaping hole in the upstage roof. Occasionally the effect feels overdone, as does the production's tendency to underscore crucial moments with lighting shifts or, in one instance, a carefully timed echo. But these are quibbles, and the nuanced performances and text provide ample compensation. *The Whipping Man* is a fascinating perspective on a familiar story; it is also a potent retelling of a primal one.

The Whipping Man is playing in the Head Theater at Center Stage, located at 700 North Calvert Street in Baltimore. Performances are Tuesdays through Sundays through May 13th. For more information, including a complete performance calendar, go to www.centerstage.org. Tickets are \$10–\$45, and can be ordered online at www.centerstage.org/whipping or by calling 410-332-0033.

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