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'The Whipping Man' at Baltimore's Centerstage: Drama aplenty

By Nelson Pressley, Published: April 12

Matthew Lopez's "The Whipping Man" is one of the most-produced new plays on U.S. stages right now, and watching the dark-and-stormy show that opened Wednesday at Baltimore's Centerstage, you can see why. The concept is fresh: A wounded confederate soldier and two of his family's slaves, all Jewish, reckon with the past and future just as the Civil War ends.

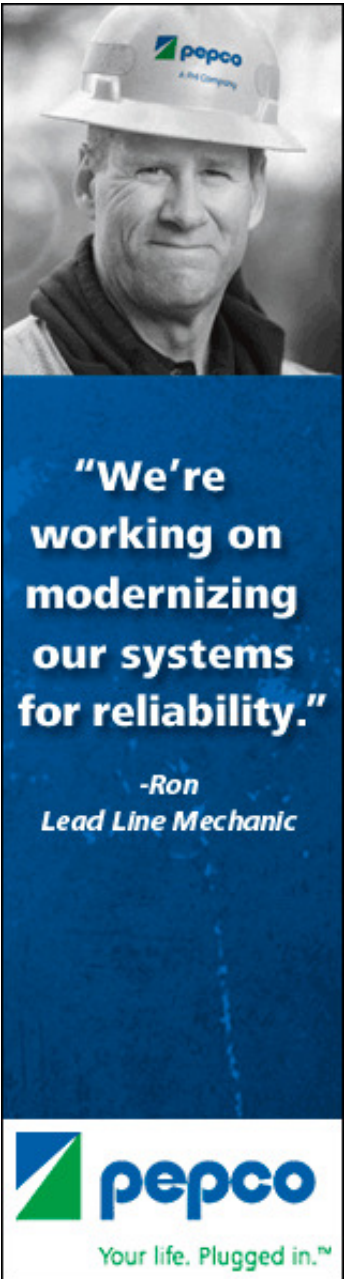
Lopez takes that scenario and fills his two-hour drama with enough liaisons and betrayals to fuel a juicy miniseries. Set designer Neil Patel matches the script's tempests by providing hard rain outside the abandoned Richmond mansion — a sooty ruin inside — where the characters return as the postwar moment begins.

Lopez wastes no time amping up the intrigue. Caleb, the young white soldier, has been shot in the leg, and Michael Micalizzi's gasping performance pulls the audience into the wounded man's agony. Fans of TV medical dramas will get a jolt out of the graphic surgical treatment improvised by Simon and John, the older and younger ex-slaves who have gathered in the empty house like refugees on a desert island.

The play's real appeal, though, lies in the histories of slavery shared by blacks and Jews. Lopez certainly finds his combustible moment: It's Passover, and Lincoln has just been assassinated. For the sage Simon and the mischievous John, freedom is at hand. Do they still want to be Jews? Will they stay on in the house? What will the history of whippings (complicated in ways that are quickly predictable) permit?

Director [Kwame Kwei-Armah](#) built a reputation as an actor and one of London's more acclaimed black dramatists before taking the top job at Centerstage last year, and his first production as boss shows a rich instinct for atmosphere. Michelle Habeck's lighting design keeps things dim (save for the odd flash of lightning), and the actors generally respond with alert, cagey performances.

Micalizzi sometimes gets stranded in a single key as Caleb; the plot's stockpile of secrets don't seem to plague this guilty white figure as they might. But Kevyn Morrow exudes steady maturity as Simon, while Johnny Ramey — who cuts an increasingly amusing figure in David Burdick's costumes as we realize this hotheaded character has been stealing the fine clothes he wears — neatly blends anger and wit as John.



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It's possible that all this could be a forceful moral contemplation, which is the long suit of Washington's Theater J (where a separate production begins performances next week). In the comparatively large Head Theater, the play comes off as a highly watchable potboiler, and that's okay. It's a little difficult to avoid a sense that Lopez hasn't developed his characters much or fully formed his story, yet it's provocative to watch the desperate men try to keep kosher as they eat horse flesh and observe Pesach with a seder.

The play's art seems to be concentrated in its setup, which entwines blacks and Jews in a way we've seldom seen. Lopez drops lots of now-it-can-be-told bombshells — truths about Caleb and John growing up together, lies about Caleb's surrender as a Confederate soldier, shocks about the fate of John's wife and daughter. And that's just the tip; watching Kwei-Armah's brooding, coiled production unfold on Patel's wide, gloomy, ravaged set, you sense a ripping epic melodrama inside this tidy play, crying for a five-hour cable treatment.

The Whipping Man

by Matthew Lopez. Directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah. About two hours. Through May 13 at Centerstage, 700 North Calvert St., Baltimore. Call 410-332-0033 or visit centerstage.org.

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