

Syracuse Stage's 'The Whipping Man' gives another perspective on Civil War history



Appearing in "The Whipping Man" at Syracuse Stage are (from left) Biko Eisen-Martin as John, Jonathan Peck as Simon, and Gregory Perri as Caleb. The play, written by Matthew Lopez and directed by Timothy Bond, opens Friday at Stage. *(Photo courtesy of Syracuse Stage/Michael Davis)*

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- American history is often presented as big picture with broad strokes. [Matthew Lopez's](#) "The Whipping Man" peers in at the personal history of three men bound together as the Civil War draws to a close. For three days in April 1865, two house slaves and their owner's son, an injured Confederate soldier, hole up in the ransacked Virginia mansion that always has been home.

The play likely opens a new chapter in Civil War history for most everyone, said Timothy Bond, who directs the production. It opens at [Syracuse Stage](#) Friday and continues through Feb. 16.

"This play is a whole new examination of it from three different perspectives, in terms of the characters of the play, that are quite delicious and fresh, exciting. I'm loving working on this play, I really am."

"The Whipping Man" brings into focus slaves who realize freedom may be at hand and the young, defeated Confederate captain who is dependent on his servants to give him sanctuary and nurse his wounds. The slave owners are Jewish and have raised their slaves in their religion. The head of this Southern family serves in the cabinet of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

During the three days of the story, several events press upon the mansion's occupants: Simon, an older slave who has remained in service at the Richmond mansion after the family leaves; John, a young slave who disappeared for a time; and Caleb, the master's son. The assassination of President Lincoln occurs on the eve of [Passover](#), a Jewish holiday remembering the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. Days before, General Robert E. Lee had surrendered at [Appomattox](#), a bloody battle in the Civil War.

The play is layered with secrets, conflicts and moral dilemmas. "But, ultimately it's a play about family, faith and identity," said Bond.

Learning some Southern Jews owned slaves and sided with the Confederate Army may come as a surprise to audiences. Now, what does it mean when one race that has suffered as slaves through the ages becomes the master.

"The conundrum of that is deeply explored in this play. It's a very interesting thing to think about it," said Bond, who is also producing artistic director at Syracuse Stage.

Because some black Southerners owned slaves and Africans sold fellow countrymen into slavery, Bond said it's not a black-white issue. "It's a human question -- when you've been under oppression in your family or culture, the history of your people, how can you do that to someone else? It's the big question," he said.

Bond added the play is not a referendum on Jewish families in the South or their ownership of slaves. He said Lopez had wanted to write a play about the ending of the Civil War and in his research discovered Passover occurred on the eve of Lincoln's assassination and after the surrender at Appomattox. This led Lopez to explore Jews living in the South and slaves raised as Jews, those relationships and the end of slavery.

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Of the three men marooned in the house, it is Simon who can envision the possibilities of a new world opening before him. There is an urgency for him to begin life as a free man. John and Caleb, in vastly different situations, are paralyzed by the uncertainties of the future and handicapped by the actions they have taken in the days before this reunion of sorts. In a sense, the slave and the slave owner are chained together. Bond said the slave master is every bit as tied

to the slave in such a relationship. When slavery ends, Bond said each confronts questions such as: Who am I? What am I? What do I do now?

Bond finds the play's heavy issues are leavened with the humor and wit in the play. He devoted many hours of research, reading books, screening films and listening to music, before rehearsals. The director began the first five days of rehearsal with actors reading the play around a table. Bond wanted everyone to understand the circumstances of the Civil War, the difference between urban and plantation slaves and the relationship between Southern Jews and the Confederacy. The performers learned about Lincoln, his visit to Richmond days before his death and his assassination and the seder, the ritual dinner during Passover.

For Bond, the play also seems timely now because of the confluence of many anniversaries: the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the assassination of President Kennedy (1963), Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech (1963), the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the [Civil Rights Act](#) (1964). Bond can see the historical link between then and now and issues that come to light in "The Whipping Man."

THE DETAILS

WHAT: "The Whipping Man," by Matthew Lopez. A Syracuse Stage production, directed by Timothy Bond.

WHEN: Through Feb. 16. Preview 7:30 p.m. today. Opening night 8 p.m. Friday. 3 and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and 7:30 p.m. Thursday. 8 p.m. Feb 7, 8, 14 and 15; 2 p.m. Feb. 8, 9 and 16; 7 p.m. Feb. 9; 7:30 p.m. Feb. 11 to 13 and 3 p.m. Feb. 15.

WHERE: Archbold Theatre, Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

TICKETS: \$30 to \$52, adults; \$35, 40 years and younger; \$18, children, 18 years and younger. To purchase, call the box office at 443-3275 or [go online](#).

FAMILY GUIDE: Because of mature subject matter, the play is recommended for children, 13 years and older.

ALSO: The Onondaga Historical Association has organized an exhibition, "Syracuse Reflections on Slavery and The Civil War," in the Coyne Lobby. It presents stories about slavery in Onondaga County before 1827. The exhibit also features the Jewish soldiers of the Fourth Onondaga County Regiment, the 149th New York Volunteers, who fought in the Civil War. The importance of Syracuse's salt industry to the Union cause also is part of the exhibit.