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[Back to Main Page](#)

Quick Search

Search only in titles:

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February 2014

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	

Syndicate

-  [Posts Atom 1.0](#)
-  [Comments Atom 1.0](#)
-  [Posts RSS 2.0](#)
-  [Comments RSS 2.0](#)
-  [Podcasts RSS 2.0](#)

Monthly Archives

2014
[February 2014 \(2\)](#)
[January 2014 \(1\)](#)
 2013
 2012
 2011
 2010
 2009

Category Archives

Jan. 31 Syracuse Stage: The Whipping Man

‘The Whipping Man’ a beautifully rendered portrait of three men bound together by a shared history

The play, set in the days following the end of the American Civil War, takes the characters — and audience — on an engaging journey of self-discovery

By Malkiel Chosed

http://cnycafemomus.com/Malkiel_Chosed.html

Most Americans know something about the Civil War. They may have studied the dates and names of important battles, or they can recall key figures like Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, or Ulysses S. Grant. The sorts of things we learned in school compete for space in our memories with enduring images from popular culture, like those from *Gone With the Wind*, *Glory* and other movies and television programs.

What is often missing in these depictions, though, is the real human story underlying the events. Given the distance in time and space, it is easy to lose sight of the human element. Who were these men and women? What were their stories? How did these events impact their lives and the lives of their children? Focusing on the complex relationship between two former slaves and their former master in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, *The Whipping Man* powerfully gives voice to these stories, affording us a profound insight into these historical events and characters.

[Adams Foundation Series \(1\)](#)
[Barbara Haas \(2\)](#)
[Book reviews \(2\)](#)
[Cazenovia Counterpoint \(1\)](#)
[CD reviews \(6\)](#)
[Chamber music \(39\)](#)
[Chautauqua Opera \(1\)](#)
[Civic Morning Musicals \(6\)](#)
[CNY Playhouse \(7\)](#)
[Commentary \(1\)](#)
[Cooperstown Summer Music Festival \(3\)](#)
[Covey Theatre Company \(5\)](#)
[Dance \(2\)](#)
[David Abrams \(83\)](#)
[David Feldman \(22\)](#)
[David Rubin \(37\)](#)
[DVD reviews \(2\)](#)
[Famous Artists Broadway \(6\)](#)
[Glimmerglass Festival \(12\)](#)
[Glimmerglass Opera \(10\)](#)
[Goldring Arts Journalism Program \(4\)](#)
[Leah Harrison \(4\)](#)
[Jon Fredric West \(1\)](#)
[Kevin Moore \(10\)](#)
[Kitchen Theatre \(2\)](#)
[Landmark Theater \(4\)](#)
[Laurel Saiz \(32\)](#)
[Malkiel Choseed \(5\)](#)
[Metropolitan Opera \(42\)](#)
[Musicals \(22\)](#)
[NYS Baroque \(5\)](#)
[Opera in film \(1\)](#)
[Opera reviews \(73\)](#)
[Orchestral music \(1\)](#)
[Rarely Done Productions \(6\)](#)
[Recitals \(8\)](#)
[Redhouse Theater \(6\)](#)
[Robert Bridge \(2\)](#)
[San Francisco Opera \(1\)](#)
[SFCM \(21\)](#)
[Shakespeare \(2\)](#)
[Shakespeare in film \(1\)](#)
[Skaneateles Festival \(9\)](#)
[Special events \(7\)](#)
[SU Drama \(14\)](#)
[Symphoria \(2\)](#)
[Masterworks Series \(2\)](#)
[Syracuse Opera \(6\)](#)
[Syracuse Stage \(22\)](#)
[Theater \(68\)](#)
[Children's theater \(2\)](#)

Set a few days after Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, the play opens with a badly wounded confederate officer, Caleb De Leon (Gregory Perri) returning under cover of darkness to his childhood home in Richmond, Virginia. Most of the occupants and their slaves and servants have fled, and the neighborhood is largely deserted. The once grand house is now in ruins, badly damaged by looters, fire, and incessant rain. Caleb is discovered by Simon (Jonathan Peck), a former slave who has remained at the house waiting for Caleb's parents to return with Simon's wife and daughter. Shortly thereafter, we are introduced to John (Biko Eisen-Martin), another former slave who has left but returned to the house for reasons that are not entirely clear to the two other men.

Caleb is suffering from an infected leg wound that in the absence of treatment will surely kill him, yet he refuses to go to the Union-run military hospital in town. Simon determines that Caleb's only chance to survive is to have the leg amputated, but he needs John's help. Newly freed, John is ambivalent about helping the man who has kept him in bondage for most of his life. As the story unfolds, the motives, fears, and secrets of each man are exposed, revealing the complex web that connects them all. The stage is set for an exciting and dramatic evening of storytelling.

Playwright Matthew Lopez introduces another element into the mix. The De Leon family is Jewish and has passed on their religious customs and faith to their slaves. Simon and John are Jews. In 1865, Passover began shortly after Lee surrendered at Appomattox, ending four years of war. Although they are reduced to utter scarcity, forced to eat horsemeat (which as John points out is hardly Kosher) just to stay alive, Simon is determined to hold a Seder — the ritual meal that marks the beginning of the Passover season.

Why make these characters Jewish? Why make them hold a Seder? While history shows us that there were some Jewish families who owned slaves, Jews in southern states were themselves a very small minority of the overall population and did not comprise the majority of slave owners. (Rabbi Dalin, who wrote one of the program notes, says that in Charleston, South Carolina more slaves were owned by "free blacks"

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than were owned by Jews.) The desire to have his characters hold a Passover Seder may offer an explanation. Passover, marking the journey from bondage into freedom that serves as a central metaphor for the story, provides the characters and audience a backdrop by which to ponder the events unfolding in the play.

According to Jewish tradition, Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, when God (through his servant Moses) led the chosen people out of slavery to embark upon a new life of freedom. The ritual is structured so as to encourage participants to see themselves as the direct beneficiaries of these miracles. During the Seder, participants are instructed to say “God led our fathers out of Egypt and if he had not done this, we would still be slaves.” It is a masterful stroke on Lopez’s part to put these words into the mouth of a newly freed slave sitting across from his former master. This potent scene bursts with tension and irony.

To the production’s credit, the Seder scene is beautifully done and punctuated by the striking singing of Jonathan Peck. His voice, rich and deep, at once expresses joy, longing and deep sadness — capturing the essence of the Seder experience.

But Lopez could have used another vehicle to tell this story. Indeed, the end of the war and the effective liberation of millions of slaves would have been enough. What is gained from a storytelling perspective by making these characters Jewish? By choosing a particular family in a particular place and time, with its own history and traditions, Lopez opens up a window into what it means to be a human being — with all its potential and deep flaws. His characters are fully realized human beings, not simply *dramatis personae*.

Eisen-Martin and Perri are technically excellent, and their interaction on stage (both with Peck and each other) is truly gripping. These are very young men — perhaps in their early to mid-20s — and both show the intemperance of youth in their words, tones, and actions. From a technical standpoint, Perri might have the biggest challenge in that he is lying on the floor in more or less the same position for 95-percent of the play, yet manages to keep the audience focused on him at all the right times.

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But the real center of the play, both dramatically and morally, is Peck's character, Simon. Here is a man who has lived a long time, having served Caleb's grandfather and father, and his difficult experiences have earned him hard-won wisdom. Perhaps Peck's greatest tool in this production is his voice. He commands the stage with it, and when he sings (a deep rich baritone) the audience is moved. This is why I was a bit disappointed when Peck would drop his lines — not in every scene, certainly, but enough to distract from the dramatic action and timing. Given Peck's credentials and extensive experience, however, I expect this will work itself out after another performance or two.

Scenic Designer William Bloodgood had his work cut out for him, considering that the entire action of the play takes place in the ruined foyer of an antebellum-style mansion in Richmond. We see the crumbling grand staircase, the partially caved in roof and broken windows. The once formal chairs have been disassembled for firewood; the once beautiful china is now chipped; the crystal chandelier is gone — all symbols of the destruction that war has wreaked on this place (and by extension the people and culture that once inhabited it). Bloodgood has done an incredible job of crafting the production's visual details to evoke the proper sense of place and a time. The incessant rain that falls through the broken roof and which can be seen and heard through the windows during the play is masterfully done.

Since the majority of the story takes place at night, Lighting Designer Darren McCroom had to find a way to evoke the soft, flickering nature of candlelight. Indeed, lighting (which when done right should be virtually unnoticed by the audience) plays an essential part in forging the emotional backdrop to any play. McCroom succeeded admirably in creating such an atmosphere for these actors, enabling their characters to blossom. The same can be said for the work of Costume Designer Gretchen Darrow-Crotty and Composer Michael Keck.

Director Timothy Bond has done a masterful job in bringing all these elements together into a cohesive and engaging whole. A three-man play set in a single location presents many challenges. How do you keep audience interest without the visual appeal of an ensemble cast and set changes? Bond has managed to make the play, split into four

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scenes, fast-paced and tightly knit. Though very little “action” happens on stage (one of the actors, remember, is laying on the floor through much of it), I found myself on the edge of my seat for most of the evening. Just as the playwright had found a natural rhythm for his dialogue, Bond has found a rhythm for his actors. Everything in this production feels natural and real. Through the interaction of these characters, Bond takes his audience on an engaging journey of self-discovery.

All in all, this play is a beautifully rendered portrait of three men bound together by a shared history. And it is this history that connects a contemporary audience to this story. Not only are Americans still living with the aftermath of this war and the pervasive injustices that had led up to (and indeed followed) it, but we are still making choices.

I encourage theatergoers to arrive a little early in order to see the photo exhibit prepared by the Onondaga Historical Association, titled “Syracuse Reflections on Slavery and The Civil War.” The exhibit educates its viewers on the history of slavery in Onondaga County and the role that Jewish families and soldiers played in the war effort. Though only three panels of text and photographs, this beautifully presented exhibit adds another layer to the audience’s understanding of these complex historical issues.

Details Box:

What: *The Whipping Man*, written by Matthew Lopez, directed by Timothy Bond

Who: Syracuse Stage Where: Archbold Theatre, Syracuse Stage Complex, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse, NY

Performance reviewed: Friday January 31, 2014

Remaining dates: Plays through February 16

Length: About 2 hours, including a 15 minute intermission

Tickets: \$30-\$52; \$18 children under 18 and SU students; \$35 under 40

Information: Call (315) 443-3275 or <http://syracusestage.org>

Family guide: Adult language and themes, violence

