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Posted: February 8, 2011 02:02 PM

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Theater: Andre Braugher Survives *The Whipping Man*

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THE WHIPPING MAN ** out of ****
The Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center

Every theater review could contain the caveat that it's a review of a certain performance on a certain night. Of course, a great play will be great almost every time but you do get the feeling sometimes that the gods are conspiring for or against your enjoyment. So it's worth noting that one woman clutched her cell phone tightly in her hand during the performance I caught of *The Whipping Man*, hoping she could muffle the sound of the ringer while it went off during the performance. Like so many wrong-headed people, she somehow felt it would be more distracting to turn the phone off then

simply try and squash the sound. Then the person trying to reach her called again. And again. Two seats away, another woman sighed so loudly and distractedly I genuinely thought she was having some medical issue. So not an ideal audience.

Not an ideal production either for this play by Matthew Lopez that is set in a crumbling, fire-ravaged mansion at the end of the Civil War in Richmond, Virginia. The home looks so dilapidated it seems more like a haunted house than a Tara. Add in murky lighting, constant rain, thunder and lightning at key moments and a distractedly torn and ragged curtain that flies first in one direction and then another and you end up thinking you're at a production of *The Woman In Black* rather than *The Whipping Man*.

The story is simple: rebel soldier Caleb (Jay Wilkison) has limped home, wounded and hurt, only to find almost everyone gone -- everyone but Simon (Andre Braugher), the family slave who is very aware that he is now a free man. Soon, John (Andre Holland), another former slave and childhood pal of Caleb pops in, having liberated some nice clothing, food and bottles of whiskey from the abandoned homes nearby. Caleb's leg has gangrene and Simon insists they hack it off right away, leading to a gruesome Act One finale as the saw bites into the flesh.

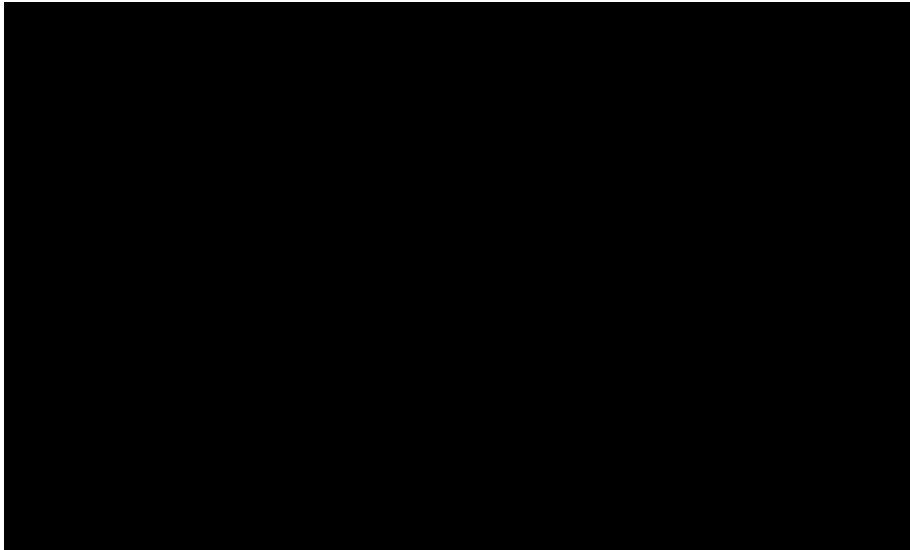
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But the real drama comes from the murky relationships between these men and what they're hiding. Is Caleb home honorably from the war or did he desert? Why won't he go to the local hospital and get medical care? What has John done to make himself so wary and why is a local white man who always had it in for him (or so John says) asking after John? Are Simon's wife and daughter safe with his former master? Or have they run off to a new life? And what's with the Passover celebration?



Caleb's family are Jews and so naturally their slaves followed suit. War has turned Caleb into an atheist -- or at least a man who can't be bothered to pray anymore when he never gets an answer -- but Simon takes great comfort and pride in his faith. The second act revolves around a seder and the sweet irony of a ceremony that looks toward a freedom that Simon and John now see in their grasp.

Still, it's a curious detail that never truly comes to life, as if Lopez discovered the fact that some Southern slave owners were Jewish and just put that in as a fascinating twist. A brief reference makes it sound like the whole neighborhood was filled with Jewish slave owners, but that's as far as this insight goes. Did being Jewish alienate Caleb's family from other Southern families? Did it mark their slaves from other slaves? Did it make the family feel or believe it treated their slaves "better?" Did Simon and Joseph ever practice any other faith and then convert? Do they see the Jewish faith as their own now or perhaps a relic of their slave days, just like their last names came from their owners as well? Truly, if you're going to mine such a curious historical detail, it should permeate the tale more completely.

Instead, we are given the sort of dramatic revelations that come so fast and furious the show starts to feel like a daytime soap (the dramatic thunder doesn't help matters). But even from the start we feel unmoored -- Simon's relationship with Caleb is never convincing. A former slave meeting his former owner's son for the first time since Emancipation is a highly charged and distinctive moment and somehow the shifting sands of their relationship just don't come convincingly to life.

Luckily, the piece is anchored as best it can be by a solid cast that give it their all. Wilkison is fine as Caleb. Holland -- so good in the recent Broadway revival of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and the Public production of *The Brother/Sister Plays* -- has the most fun with the charming John. Braugher does his best with the stiff Simon, bringing what he can to the modest story of meeting Abraham Lincoln (the greatest moment of his life) and pumping what life he can into a section where Simon is singing and slapping his thighs while preaching during the Passover celebration. It's like an August Wilson moment without the poetry. Though Braugher does his best, you're always aware of the attempt at theatricality.

That said, it's an interestingly flawed, ambitious work poorly served by the direction of Doug Hughes, the scenic design by John Lee Beatty and the lighting by Ben Stanton. One good moment was the way they depicted Caleb in a snowstorm writing a letter to the woman he loved (a slave, you won't be surprised to hear). But that was undercut by a text that echoed too much the famous Civil War letter by Sullivan Ballou. When the direction and look of the show wasn't getting in the way of the play, the play was getting in the way of the production. Hopefully, with more plays and more productions, Lopez will be able to discover what he is capable of achieving.

Here's Lopez discussing an earlier production of *The Whipping Man* at the Old Globe in San Diego. (The brief glimpses of scenes are not from this production.)



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NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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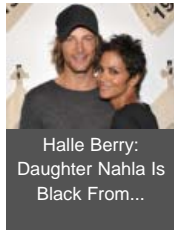
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