



FRONT PAGE	POLITICS	BUSINESS	MEDIA	ENTERTAINMENT	COMEDY	SPORTS	STYLE	WORLD	GREEN	FOOD	TRAVEL	TECH	
LIVING	HEALTH	DIVORCE	ARTS	BOOKS	RELIGION	IMPACT	EDUCATION	COLLEGE	NY	LA	CHICAGO	DENVER	BLOGS

Connect



Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: February 8, 2011 02:02 PM

- BIO
- Get Email Alerts
- Become a Fan
- Bloggers' Index

Theater: Andre Braugher Survives *The Whipping Man*

Inspiring Funny Hot Scary Outrageous Amazing Weird Crazy

Read More: [Broadway](#), [City Center](#), [Civil War](#), [Manhattan Theatre Club](#), [Matthew Lopez](#), [Off Broadway](#), [Play](#), [The Whipping Man](#), [Theater](#), [Entertainment News](#)

SHARE THIS STORY

0	4	0	1

Get Entertainment Alerts

[Sign Up](#)

Submit this story

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.

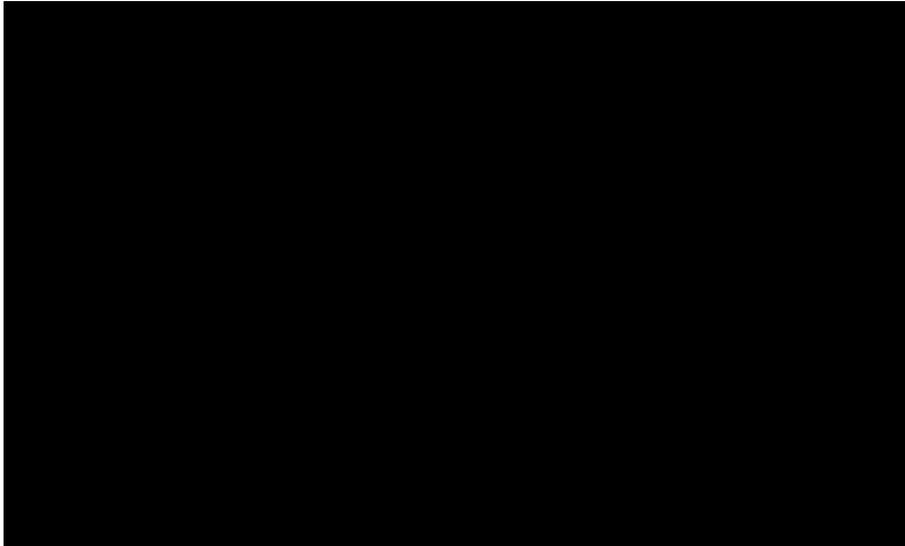
ADVERTISEMENT

FOLLOW HUFFINGTON POST

MOST POPULAR ON HUFFPOST 1 of 2

- WATCH: Christina Aguilera Totally Messes Up National Anthem**
 10K
- Rock Legend Found Dead**
 1K
- Obama, O'Reilly Interview: Super Bowl Sit-Down Between President & Fox News Host (VIDEO)**
 2K
- How Blue Valentine's Director Killed Michelle Williams & Ryan Gosling's Marriage**
 554
- WATCH: The Top 10 Funniest Super Bowl Commercials**
 1K
- Andrew Zimmern Finds The Most Bizarre Food Ever, And The Limit Of His Appetite**
 954
- Josh Brolin: Scientology 'Really F**king Bizarre'**

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.)



Like 490



Palin Blasts Obama's Handling Of Egypt

Like 5K



Olbermann Announces New Gig

Like 3K

DON'T MISS HUFFPOST BLOGGERS ◀ 1 of 5 ▶



Rhea Perlman

Meeting Children in Need



Rev. Jesse Jackson

A Chance to Get Some Answers for Chicago

HOT TRENDS

1. Kim Kardashian W Magazine
2. Christina Aguilera Super Bowl
3. Halle Berry
4. Kim Kardashian Nude
5. Olivia Wilde

People.com



Ty Murray: Jewel's Pregnancy Is a 'Miracle'

READ MORE ▶



Miley Cyrus Gets Cozy with Amy Winehouse's Ex

READ MORE ▶



Lindsay Lohan To Be Charged with Felony Grand Theft

READ MORE ▶

More Celebrity News at People.com

Popeater



Kevin Smith Lost 65 Pounds on 'Airplane Diet'



Heidi Montag Joining 'The Real Housewives?'



Fantasia Barrino to Play Mahalia Jackson

More Celebrity News at Popeater.com

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

- Blood From A Stone ** 1/2
- Devil Boys From Beyond **
- Driving Miss Daisy **
- Elf *
- Elling **
- A Free Man Of Color ** 1/2
- Gatz ***
- The Grand Manner **
- The Great Game ***
- Gruesome Playground Injuries ***
- The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2
- The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2
- John Gabriel Borkman * 1/2
- La Bete ** 1/2
- Les Miserables ***
- Lombardi **
- The Merchant Of Venice *** 1/2
- Middletown ***
- The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore *
- Mistakes Were Made ** 1/2
- Nixon In China *** 1/2
- Other Desert Cities **
- Our Town with Helen Hunt ***
- The Pee-wee Herman Show ***
- The Road To Qatar *
- The Scottsboro Boys ****
- The Whipping Man **
- Wings **
- Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown **

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz

TOP VIDEO PICKS

1 of 10



Justin Bieber's Valentine Plans

PLAY VIDEO



Olivia Wilde and Hubby Split

PLAY VIDEO



Meryl's British Transformation

PLAY VIDEO

MOST DISCUSSED RIGHT NOW



Race War Continues: Halle Berry Cites Slavery Rules



Scientology Under FBI Investigation For Work Done For Tom Cruise: Report

HOT ON FACEBOOK



Christina Aguilera and the Hideous Cult of Oversouling

Like 15K



Katy Perry Reveals Her Weight

Like 123

HOT ON TWITTER

POWERED BY TOPSY



mayhemstudios

RT @Alyssa_Milano: Sweetest story ever. Baseball coach donates kidney to a player
<http://huff.to/eADPcT> /via @HuffPostImpact @TouchByAM

retweet



ginamchen

Email Use Plummets 59% Among Teens <http://huff.to/dWWLAS> via @huffingtonpost

retweet

HUFFPOST'S BIG NEWS PAGES



112th Congress



Catholic Church



Financial Crisis



Cap and Trade



Chicago Restaurants



Designers

More in Entertainment...



Katy Perry Reveals Her Weight In 'Elle'...



Scientology Under FBI Investigation For Work Done...



Halle Berry: Daughter Nahla Is Black From...



Jennifer Lawrence In A Revealing Swimsuit (PHOTO)



Video



Parenting



Atheism

MORE BIG NEWS PAGES »

FOLLOW HUFFINGTON POST



Comments

1

Pending Comments

0

[View FAQ](#)

Post a Comment

HuffPost Social News BETA

Login or connect with:



More Login Options ▾

Large empty text area for posting a comment.

To reply to a Comment: Click "Reply" at the bottom of the comment; after being approved your comment will appear directly underneath the comment you replied to.

Preview Comment

Post Comment

Share your Comment:

Post to Facebook.

Post to Blogger.

Post to Twitter.

Post to WordPress.

Post to TypePad.

Post to Tumblr.

[View All](#)

Recency | Popularity

HUFFPOST SUPER USER

thetalkdiva 2 minutes ago (11:06 PM)

47 Fans



Enjoyed the review. Still would like to see it.

[Permalink](#) | [Share it](#)

Post a Comment

SEARCH

FRONT PAGE	POLITICS	BUSINESS	MEDIA	ENTERTAINMENT	COMEDY	SPORTS	STYLE	WORLD	GREEN	FOOD	TRAVEL	TECH	
LIVING	HEALTH	DIVORCE	ARTS	BOOKS	RELIGION	IMPACT	EDUCATION	COLLEGE	NY	LA	CHICAGO	DENVER	BLOGS

[Advertise](#) | [Log In](#) | [Make HuffPost your Home Page](#) | [RSS](#) | [Careers](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#)

[User Agreement](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Comment Policy](#) | [About Us](#) | [Powered by Movable Type](#)

Copyright © 2011 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. | "The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

