

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Whipping Man Cuts Deep & Wide

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 14th, 2015

COSTA MESA — Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man* is not a new play, but it is the first play he wrote that brought him notoriety, and a New York production that put him on the map as one of the most promising young playwrights writing today. It premiered in Montclair, NJ, at Luna Stage, in 2006 and has been widely produced since, including a 2010 production at San Diego's Old Globe. But the current production at South Coast Repertory, presented in association with the Pasadena Playhouse, is the closest it's come to Los Angeles, and it will come even closer when it moves to The Playhouse in February.

It's easy to see why this play captured the attention of so many theatres. Its premise is startling. It takes place in April 1865, at the conclusion of the Civil War, when a brand new emancipation coincides with, of all things, the Jewish Passover. This overlay of two freedoms from slavery takes on added meaning (and some contradictions) as two slaves and the son of their former owner find themselves marooned in the ruined shell of the antebellum mansion that once was home — to them and to their owner, who happened to be Jewish.

That fact alone is surprising and little known enough to provoke curiosity. We don't think of Jews as being part of the Confederacy, yet it seems there were quite a number of them. They owned slaves and profited from that trade. Lopez, who worked and reworked the plot until he got it right, is a master of the many-layered story that unravels and reveals itself like a rosebud. This is not the simple investigation of a political circumstance. He spins a web of personal events around the historical one. These go well beyond circumstance to uncover painful human secrets, as all good plays should. They may be born of a confluence of history, destiny and religion, but they are delivered on stage with the excitement of a mystery thriller.



Charlie Robinson and Adam Haas Hunter

To say much more than this would be to give away the progression of a plot that needs shielding and should be discovered and savored moment by moment. It is, for a moment, oddly incongruous to hear the Hebrew litanies of the Seder in the unlikely mouths of these three men, trapped in this strange isolation not solely by the happenstance of war; they turn out to be irretrievably linked by the ramifications of a life spent together that go well beyond the ordinary.

Founding SCR Director Martin Benson has done a masterful job of unspooling and pacing the story in a manner that benefits from the astute casting of this tightly knit trio of actors. The superb Charlie Robinson delivers a compelling performance as Simon, the seasoned majordomo,

unflappable guardian of this estate in shambles, confidently trusting in his former master's return and the fulfillment of promises made. Adam Haas Hunter's Caleb, the Jewish scion of the family who has returned to the homestead severely wounded, is a man damaged by much more than a gangrenous shin. And Jarrod M. Smith is the former slave John, the wild card of this household—alert, skittish, defiant, a clever thief who scours the abandoned neighborhood for food, clothing, rumors, whiskey and frying pans. All three are terrific.



Adam Haas Hunter and Jarrod M. Smith

Set designer Tom Buderwitz's interior of this broken mansion, with its remnants of grandeur, is made all the more haunting by Lonnie Rafael Alcaraz's stormy lighting, while Angela Balogh Calin's costumes chart the progress of the changing fortunes of its denizens. These small, yet significant details fill out the emotional portrait of the broader period—the plight and devastation of the post-war South.

But it's the writing that carries the play. Lopez's script is a triumph of economy and timing. He knows how to respect the truth and intention of his writing. There is no equivocation and no holding back. His eloquence and simplicity border on poetry, without cant, and woven into a tale of lifelong interaction, good and bad.

My first encounter with this writer's work was last year at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, which premiered his *The Legend of Georgia McBride*, a glorious comedy filled with joy and heart, that became the hit of the Denver season. Let's hope some enterprising Southern California theatre takes it on.

Until then, there is *The Whipping Man*, not to be missed, either at South Coast Rep where it runs through Jan 25 or in Pasadena starting February 3.

WHAT: *The Whipping Man*

WHERE: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Sundays 7:45pm, through Jan 24; Saturdays-Sundays, 2pm, through Jan 25. ASL interpreted Jan 24, 2pm. NO evening performance Jan 25

HOW: Tickets begin @ \$22, available at the South Coast Repertory box office or at 714.708.5555 or at www.scr.org

All photos by Debora Robinson

FYI: The production moves to **The Pasadena Playhouse**, 39 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena, CA 91101

WHEN: Feb 3-March 1

HOW: Tickets are \$30-\$75 with premiere seating @ \$125. Available online at

PasadenaPlayhouse.org or by calling the Box Office at 626-356-7529 or by visiting The Pasadena Playhouse Box Office. For groups of 8 or more, call 626-921-1161

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