
Review

Reviewed Work(s): FATHER COMES HOME FROM THE WARS (PARTS 1, 2 & 3) by Suzan-Lori Parks and Jo Bonney

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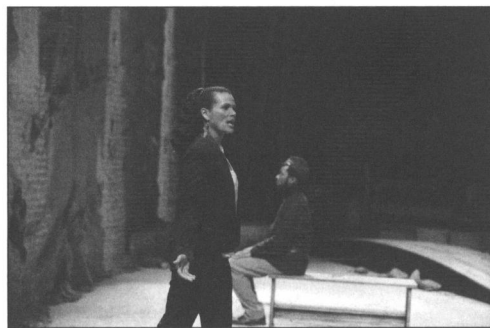
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January LaVoy (the Poet) and Neal Ghant (Native Guard) performing the title poem in *Native Guard*. (Photo: Courtesy of Alliance Theatre.)

of his performance the Native Guard soldier exited the stage, but his shadow remained onstage as a projected image, a metaphor for the haunting, painful racist history that this country bears. In a way, it was another kind of written mark imprinting the stage.

Trethewey's words did not allow us to escape the various types of oppression and violence that still persist in our society. In her poem "Graveyard Blues," she memorializes her mother's murder as if it were carved on a tombstone: "my mother's name, stone pillow for my head." A staff member later told me that "on closing night, Natasha said she was struck with how the cards on the burlap made the cards look like tombstones—an image that she seemed to think fitting." Fitting indeed, as the inscriptions that grace these stones seek to honor the deceased, yet they are also portraits of those who do the writing. They may be a "stone pillow," but they are resting places that cannot be put to rest.

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FATHER COMES HOME FROM THE WARS (PARTS 1, 2 & 3). By Suzan-Lori Parks. Directed by Jo Bonney. The Public Theater, in association with the American Repertory Theatre, New York City. 25 October 2014.

Father Comes Home from the Wars is an ongoing project, if not a promise; Parts 1, 2 & 3 were performed at both the Public Theater and the American Repertory Theatre during the 2014–15 season. In its planned entirety *Father Comes Home* will consist of nine parts, which span the past century and a half. Through these first three iterations Suzan-Lori Parks explores liberty: its worth, how it is transferred, giv-

en, stolen, denied. Here, as throughout her oeuvre, freedom serves as a *project* of our national history, of the histories—official, and as-yet-unearthed—of slavery, ancestry, and belonging. Riffing off of, and echoing Homer's *Odyssey*, this epic voyage maps freedom's journey, arrival, and how its one-time (and oft still-unrealized) absence haunts our present. And as we have come to expect, wordplay and the distinctive rhythms that Parks infuses into her work circulate through the hauntingly masterful *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (Parts 1, 2 & 3).

These first three parts are set during the Civil War, following the slave Hero and his relationship to freedom. Part 1, "A Measure of a Man," opens with the Chorus of Less Than Desirable Slaves wagering on Hero's imminent decision on whether to join his master in the war; the master has promised Hero his freedom upon their return, should he choose to join the Confederate army. Hero is conflicted because he would leave behind Penny, his love; he would leave without his trusty dog, who is lost; and to trust his master is a gamble. Part 1 concludes with Hero's decision to join his master, hoping to earn his freedom while fighting against it.

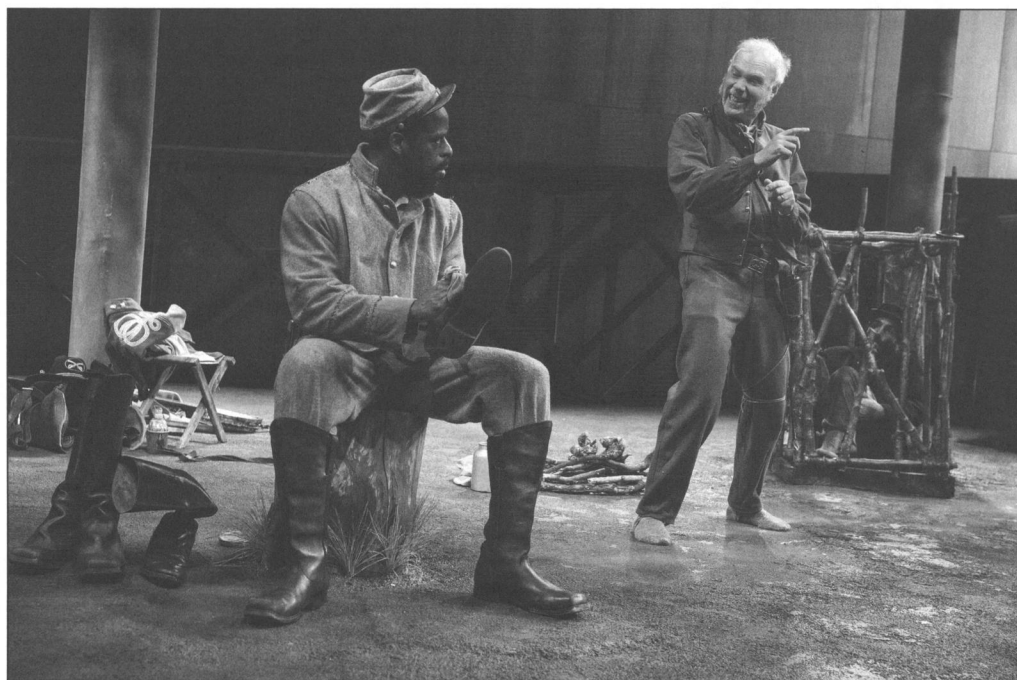
Months later, in Part 2, "A Battle in the Wilderness," Hero and his master, the Colonel, having lost their battalion, camp with their captive, a Union soldier named Smith, and muse on value: the cost of a slave, who deserves freedom, and at whose cost. If Part 1 buzzed with anticipation, Part 2 stretched out into contemplation. When the Colonel exits, leaving Hero to pack up camp and follow with their captive, Hero and Smith take up the discourse, prompting Hero to ponder a life in which he belonged to himself. "What's the beauty in not being worth anything?" he wonders. In the Colonel's absence Hero is also presented with the opportunity to flee, challenging again his loyalty to his master and to the structures that enslave him.

Part 3, "The Union of My Confederate Parts," marks Hero's return home and the gifts and news he brings with him. It is a year later, the Colonel has died (although that news also travels slowly), and Hero has chosen a new name for himself: Ulysses. Hero-then-Ulysses reunites with Penny and his long-lost dog, Odyssey Dog, while the Runaway Slaves plot to make a break. The Runaway Slaves run; Penny leaves. Ulysses remains, having no one with whom to share the good news: word of the emancipation of slaves and the war's end. Freedom is left unheard, unknown, unrealized.

Throughout, Parks peppers the dialogue with colloquial anachronisms ("Snap!" said one Less Than Desirable Slave to another) that harmonize with the play's vernacular. The phrase "Mark it!" repeats throughout "A Measure of a Man" as the



Louis Cancelmi (Smith) and Sterling K. Brown (Hero) in *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (Parts 1, 2 & 3).
(Photo: Joan Marcus.)



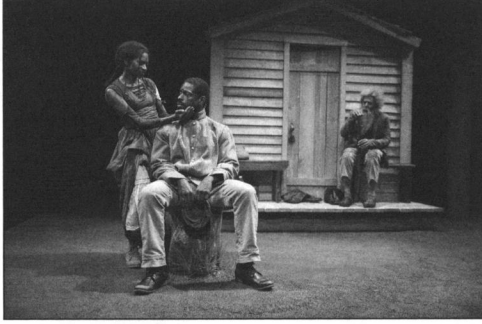
Sterling K. Brown (Hero) and Ken Marks (Colonel) in *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (Parts 1, 2 & 3).
(Photo: Joan Marcus.)

Chorus antes up and bets its treasures (a spoon, both shoes) on Hero's decision. "Mark it" played to the ear, of course, the same way that "market" would—same song, different measure. In "A Battle in the Wilderness" the Colonel prompted Hero to step onto a tree stump to recreate a slave auction so as to appraise his prized-slave's value. From one part to the next the measure of human worth ricocheted between physical bodies and wordplay. Jo Bonney's directorial choices complemented the blending of past and present language. Characters fist-bumped in (contemporary) salutation, and while awaiting the hour of Hero's choice, characters raised a hand, thumb out at an angle, and squinted to determine the distance from the sun to the horizon, time-telling. This repeated gesture became part of a visual vocabulary that marked the world of the play in 1862. The physical and linguistic vocabularies purposefully co-mingled time to presence the struggle for freedom—notably the freedom of black and brown bodies in this nation—as a war in the past as well as the present.

As Hero, Sterling K. Brown was earnest and captivating. In a particularly poignant moment in Part 3, when Hero announced his new name, he asked the characters onstage, but also the entire room: "Any of you ever done that? Hmm? Choose your

own name?" Brown looked directly at several audience members (he caught and held my gaze), interrogating not only the historicity of freedom, but its personal weight. In Part 2 while contemplating his escape Hero imagined what he would say to a "patroller" if caught. Brown brought both hands up, palms out, a gesture of surrender that recalled the "hands up, don't shoot" protests in response to the killing of unarmed Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Performed by a black man wearing the uniform of the Confederacy, the gesture further complicated past and present realities of freedom of/and the black body.

In Part 3 Parks doubles down on her continued interventions in musicality and rhythm with the character of Odyssey Dog (a riff on "odd-see," as the dog has eye trouble). As Odyssey Dog, Jacob Ming-Trent was energetic and charismatic, with a furry tunic vest and legwarmers as the only sartorial nod to his cross-species drag, and spoke in the exhausting and exhaustive tempo of a panting dog. Parks's wordplay, some of which can only be discerned by reading the text, is consummately playful, so perhaps the bounding dog is as dynamic as any number of Parks's homonym loops. As always, she works deftly with the interplay between form and content.



Jenny Jules (Penny), Sterling K. Brown (Hero), and Peter Jay Fernandez (The Oldest Old Man) in *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (Parts 1, 2 & 3). (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

Parks's well-documented repetition and revision ("rep & rev," as she refers to it) not only traces leit-motifs within a given play, but connects her work into constellations. *Father Comes Home* echoes *The America Play*, *Venus*, and *365 Plays/365 Days*, among other works: a spade, uh kiss, a faux-father, a penny, the title itself. For those unfamiliar with her work, *Father Comes Home* is no less resounding an exploration of identity and emancipation. While Parks has riffed on Lincolns, on Hesters, on holes, and on digging in this first third of a hoped-for epic, she tracks freedom. In the play's final moment the physical proof of freedom stalls in Ulysses' hands, never reaching Penny or the Runaway Slaves. We are left tracing freedom's path and possibility. If the Runaway Slaves (having run off) believe themselves to still be slaves, are they free? Is Ulysses' freedom contingent upon delivering the good news—if not legally, then personally? Who then, is free? Repeat. Revise. Six parts to come.

LAURA R. DOUGHERTY
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ALLEGRO. By Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Directed by John Doyle. Classic Stage Company, New York City. 22 November 2014.

Classic Stage Company's extraordinary production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* demonstrated just how resonant this experimental 1947 piece remains today. Indeed, in the hands of director John Doyle, *Allegro* felt utterly contemporary, revealing itself as the aesthetic forebear of many of the most experimental works of musical theatre,

including those of Stephen Sondheim, who worked as a gofer on the original Broadway production. Doyle, following his successes on Broadway with *Sweeney Todd* and *Company*, mounted this piece using a small ensemble of actor-instrumentalists. This salutary staging revealed not only the uniqueness of the storytelling, but also the exceptional possibilities and occasional limits of Doyle's methods.

The plot of the play is fairly conventional: We follow an idealistic doctor from his birth until the time when he is persuaded by his materialistic wife to work at a city hospital, where he becomes the physician attending to a group of rich society types whose demands for endless consultations, novel remedies, and vitamin injections distract him from the humane practice of healing the sick. As Hammerstein himself noted, there was "no novelty in *Allegro* except its style of presentation," which was indeed ambitious. Unlike *Oklahoma!*, which featured Ado Annie and Will Parker alongside the main characters, and *Carousel* (with Carrie and Mr. Snow), *Allegro* dispenses with the structural device of parallel couples and instead focuses squarely on one character's life, from his birth until his early thirties. It also employs a number of nonnaturalistic devices, including a Greek Chorus that comments on the action and the deployment of characters as ghosts, or "presences," once they have passed away.

Doyle further clarified the narrative by revising how the main character, Joe, is depicted. In the original production the audience was initially addressed in the second person, cultivating the sense that they were the character and allowing them to identify with him. Not until Joe was a freshman in college was this identity transferred onto an onstage actor. In this production, however, actor Claybourne Elder embodied Joe's character from the very start of the play, with Doyle reassigning to him several lines of dialogue and song originally given to the Chorus. Whatever may be lost in abandoning the clever projection of Joe onto the audience, much was gained through the more straightforward presentation of the character. Doyle also streamlined the treatment of Joe's college years: this production excluded a number of exchanges that depicted his roommate as an inconsiderate cheater, rendering him instead as an all-American sidekick, which admirably simplified the plot. Perhaps less pleasing was Doyle's decision to excise a creative, dream-like montage in which the lectures of Joe's professors merge with his own thoughts about his girlfriend.

The musical structure of *Allegro* is rather unexpected, distributing its score fairly democratically among a range of characters—even assigning perhaps the catchiest melody ("So Far") to an insignificant character who appears in only one scene. This