

Appomattox: From the Civil War to Civil Rights

Written by Professor Mahmoud El-Kati
Monday, 05 November 2012 11:26

With apologies to Soul Brother #1 James Brown; Please, Please, Please, Please see this play. Please. The play premiered on Friday, October 5, at the Guthrie Theatre and runs until November 11. This play has merit, if for no other reason that it has some of the right people in the right places, which is a strange twist of candidness about a presentation of American history.

Act I, takes place at Appomattox, then a little known village in central Virginia in 1865. It is now a historic place. It is where General Robert E. Lee, head of the southern Confederate Army met and surrendered to General Ulysses Grant, leader of the victorious northern United States of America's Union Army. The surrender of Lee to Grant represents one of the most significant events, not only in U.S. history, but world history. The result of this and the abolition of Black enslavement changed the course of history on four continents, at least if not the world. The meeting of these two exceptional military leaders signified the end of the hostilities between the southern and northern armed forces. Officially, but not literally, the Civil War was over. We must keep in mind the lasting great depth of great feeling that was consumed by this war. The United States of America was the only slave holding nation that was forced to abolish the evil institution of enslavement by warfare. In the 1880s, after the American Civil War, in Brazil and in Russia, the institution was dissolved politically by the stroke of a pen.

This drama on the American Civil War was written by Christopher Hampton, an Englishman, and why not, since England is the mother country of the United States of America? This fact may have something to do with the integrity of the play. While this play may have its flaws that any half-baked historian might cite, it is considerably beyond the usual all white fantasy, as depicted by Hollywood and our public, parochial or private school curricula on the Civil War, disguised as history. The relentless white wash of history by generations of white supremacist professors, test book writers and test givers remains the foremost obstacle to the ideal of a just society. This has to do with everything including the so-called "achievement gap." This discussion about the "achievement gap" is misplaced. This is a shameless shame that this fraud continues. The growth of American democracy, not to mention, the American vision of reality remains chained to White supremacist racist propaganda.

The casting of the play is superb. All of the actors deserve at least a hearty salute and the director likewise. In this play there is Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most eloquent voice for democracy that the Republic has ever known. He was a true democrat, as in small "d" democrat. This one time bondsman lived a life embracing all of humanity including his enemies. He loved social justice and hated all acts of oppression of women, native people, as well as the enslaved. This is a transcendent position. But for the color of his skin, he could have been President. The relatively brief, but critical relationship between Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln is revealed in the play. The two men knew one another. It was Douglass who pressured Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, as a war measure. It was Douglass who advised Lincoln to use "Colored" troops as a way to break the back of the Confederate military power. It was recognized that the Black labor force that supported the Confederate army represented a military advantage to the south. Karl Marx who keenly followed reports on the Civil War from afar (England) offered similar advice. Yes, that Karl Marx! Douglass was a major recruiter of Black soldiers for the Union cause. Two of his sons were among the first to volunteer.

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The play did not reveal this because of its narrow focus. Over 200,000 Black soldiers fought on the Union side and nearly 50,000 died. They participated in 447 battles while winning 22 Congressional Medals of Honor for their heroism. The War changed course after the entry of African Americans as soldiers in 1863. Abraham Lincoln himself saluted the Black soldiers by stating, "Had it not been for the aid of colored troops we would not have been able to put down the rebellion." One of the great fantasies of the American imagination of history is that the Civil War was fought between white men, over the liberation of Black people from bondage. The un-tampered with truth is that Black Americans fought to liberate themselves.

Lincoln requested Douglass' presence at his second inaugural address in 1865. He wanted the opinion of one of the more brilliant minds in America of that day, on the merits of his speech. After confronting some resistance to his entrance to White House, they met. The President wanted to know, "What did you think of my speech." Douglass replied, "Mr. President, it was a sacred moment." This "sacred moment" was sandwiched between those familiar lines of that speech, "With malice towards none, and charity for all." Lincoln also alluded to the "Unrequited labor," an acknowledgement of the super exploitation of Black labor in building the wealth of the Republic. What if every American school child across all boundaries could matter of factly learn of the life of this magnanimous personality? My claim is that this would be a much better and more human society.

In the play also was the presence of Elizabeth Kleckley, the Black woman who served as confidante, advisor and friend to Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife. Elizabeth Kleckley was also a woman who possessed several skills. She was a dressmaker (a clothing designer today). She also had some rudimentary knowledge of medicine. This was not uncommon among the enslaved population. The knowledge of herbs (pharmaceuticals) was a carryover from African medicine. Not only were Black people in the White House during this time, but Black hands also built the White House. Another note was that Mrs. Louis Dorsey came to the White House with Frederick Douglass to meet President Lincoln on one occasion. Mrs. Dorsey was the wife of Thomas Dorsey, a successful Black caterer in the City of Philadelphia. This affirms WEB Dubois's work "Philadelphia Negro" in which he stated that Black Americans dominated the catering trade in that city throughout the latter half of the 19th century.

Another huge reason why we should see this fine play is that it reflects and connects directly the Civil War of the 19th century America to the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century; one is the hand maiden of the other. One cannot really gain an understanding of the human weight and complexity of America and where we are today without having a grasp of these two telling experiences in the continuum in American history. The Civil War and its failure to produce democracy, in turn, produced the Civil Rights movement's struggle for democracy in the 20th century. Writing American history without the experience and presence of African Americans is like writing the Holy Bible without the experiences and presence of Jesus Christ.

Act II highlights the modern Civil Rights Movement with a number of events and characters in various places. The play traces the struggle for Black voting rights in Selma, AL, to make the clear-cut connection in the struggle to gain and maintain the right to vote in 2012. Flashes of the cross burnings, physical and psychological brutality endured by Black Americans are referred to in words and deeds. Christopher Hampton uses two bigger than life personalities to capture the

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spirit of this tumultuous time: Martin Luther King and Lyndon Baines Johnson. The actors in these roles were superb. Harry Groener, as Lyndon Baines Johnson, captured the essence of myth and reality of LBJ in all of his raw and raucous borderline profane ingenious political self. The language of LBJ, his strong-arm tactics and lack of respect for certain people is laid bare, including dictating a letter to one of his underlings while sitting on the toilet. Despite his behavior, which is crude and strangely charming at the same time. LBJ was one of the most arresting figures ever to occupy the presidency. It is hard to argue with the fact that he had one of the most transformed public personas, perhaps unequal in American politics. No one as a politician has been more astute at playing the middle against both ends and both ends against the middle. Johnson, a reconstructed segregationist, transformed himself almost overnight into a leading light in liberal politics. He was the essence of what politics really is. It's a practical game, you get what you get, keep what you can hold and you do what works. Some people get hurt. Some are rewarded. Good politicians understand that "All is fair in love and war...and in politics, it's fairer."

Johnson, straight out of redneck country and once a southerner, became a man of the west. The strategy he used to clean up his image was masterful. He knew how to use power. As Majority Whip in the US Senate, he had his way. He disappointed his mentor, Richard B. Russell of Georgia. Russell was one of the most venomous segregationist, who hated Black Americans with a passion. As Whip, LBJ had the status to do anything in American politics, except to become the President of the United States. There had long been a covenant among white American leaders that America could not elect someone as Head of State, a state that professed liberal democracy, who aligned himself as a segregationist, which is to say the doctrine of white supremacy. This would be bad politics for America on the world stage. There was an unwritten code that southerners could not be President. And none had been since the slaveholding Presidents of Andrew Johnson, who replaced Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson being the other exception. Wilson was transformed on the surface into a northerner by the fact that he was born in Virginia and then became president of Princeton University. LBJ's makeover from a Dixiecrat to liberal, from southerner to westerner, in a strange way allowed him to push Civil Rights legislation through Congress for the first time since Reconstruction. Two minor Civil Rights Bills of 1957 and 1960 were long overdue and speaks to the US government's absence and lack of responsibility to its Black citizens. The struggle for Civil rights changed President Johnson. President Johnson changed Congress, and Congress changed the country. Comparing Lincoln and Johnson to each other as politicians, interestingly, gives Johnson the benefit of a doubt, as in the ability to persuade and bully bump. At bottom, what President Johnson did was to make an intelligent political response to a powerful social movement, just as Lincoln did in regards to the abolitionists' movement and the emancipation of the enslaved. The Civil rights movement was a quiet "continuation" of the Civil war at the level of low intensity warfare even though President John F. Kennedy called for the Civil Rights Bill before he was assassinated. He could not have accomplished what President Johnson delivered. In short, a straight ahead liberal like Kennedy could not deliver what a mastermind of racial politics could.

During Act II, the other bigger than life characterization was Martin Luther King, as played by Shawn Hamilton. It has been suggested that seeing Hamilton alone is worth the price of the ticket. He was simply brilliant. Hamilton presents a powerful presence in his role as MLK. He

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even bears a physical resemblance. His oratorical skill in sonorous voice and cadence is overwhelming. To see his performance alone is inspirational. Of all the significant events of the Civil Rights movement, which transformed the Republic, Hampton closed with the Selma Alabama voting rights story. The phase of the human rights struggle that was generated by the murder of young Jimmy Lee Jackson, which led to a national call for action, which was inspired by "Bloody Sunday" that unseemly horror, which took place at Edmund Pettus bridge in the spring of 1965. The state troopers trampled upon the bodies of peaceful demonstrators with horses, billy clubs and tear gas. It is from this context that Hampton elects to give the symbol and perception to these turbulent times.

There were many dangerous and heroic events before the Selma to Montgomery march, a 50-mile march for voting rights. Just a year before, three men who were working for voting rights were brutally murdered in Philadelphia, MS. One of the three murdered men, James Chaney, the Black member of the trio, was dismembered. The year after 1966, the slogan of "Black power," which was pronounced by SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael and energized a great cross section of the Black community, became common. This slogan gave a voice to the rebellion and uprisings in the long hot summers in Harlem, NY, in 1964. But 1965, in particular, was a crucial part of the transformation of a caste-bound society to a more open one for Black people. And of course this transformation opened society for other disaffected segments of the American population with axes to grind such as more white students (some were already involved), white women and the second wave of feminism, other non-whites, gays and lesbians, the aged and others like physically handicapped and so on. The most arresting of these uprisings was the Watts community in south central Los Angeles, which was followed by the emergence of young white radicalism. The year 1965 was a peak year for popular progressive politics from all quarters of American life. Besides Jimmy Lee, two other killings occurred: that of the Rev. J. Reeb, a young white minister murdered on the streets of Selma and Viola Liuzzo, a white working class house wife and mother of five from Detroit, MI.

President Johnson activated the Army to protect the marchers. This led to another great legal victory of passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is the landmark piece of national legislation that outlawed discriminatory voting practices that had been responsible for the widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans. This Act, of course, was preceded by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which allowed Blacks to enjoy public facilities. The Selma march represented the last of the legal victories before the passage of the Open Housing Act of 1968, which is the same year of Dr. King's untimely death. At the Selma demonstration Dr. King made one of his most eloquent speeches of "How long? Not long! Truth crushed to the Earth will still rise. How long? Not long! No lie can live forever..." Jim Crow, that's to say, legalized racism was dead after Selma for all intents and purposes. But the doctrine of white supremacy still persisted and it still persists today; however, it exists in more insidious ways, despite the election of a US president of African descent.

The playwright should be commended for simply acknowledging the presence and contributions of Black people in the making of America. This play offers something refreshingly insightful that is not offered in your hackneyed formal school education and popular media programming. This is a play with some relevance to the Black experience in the U.S. It would do well for not only curious Black and white minds to view, but the whole of the American community. This could

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spark and ignite some critical thinking. The connection between the American Civil war and the American Civil rights movement (a model for the world) is a real and deep part of our national heritage. Only fools or the emotionally warped will deny this inescapable fact. Albert E. Einstein said it best, "The distinction that we make between the past, the present and the future is a stubborn illusion." The Civil war haunts us to this very day.