

Theatre Review: 'Out of the Vineyard' presented by Joe's Movement Emporium in conjunction with the Freedom Stories Initiative

MD mdtheatre guide.com/2023/09/theatre-review-out-of-the-vineyard-presented-by-joes-movement-emporium-in-conjunction-with-the-freedom-stories-initiative/

By Anne Valentino

September 13, 2023



"Out of the Vineyard" by Psalmayene 24 featuring Scott Abernethy, Frank Britton, Adrienne Nelson, and Jacqueline Youm. Photo by Sabir Elmouakil.

Psalmayene 24's play "Out of the Vineyard," now running at Joe's Movement Emporium in Mt. Rainier, offers an incisive look at racism and slavery in America through stories conveyed by descendants of enslaved people. The play is a series of constantly flowing, sharply defined vignettes touching largely on the freedom suits that transpired in Prince George's County between 1787 and 1861 and the reverberations of those suits. Four actors assume a multiplicity of roles as they work to paint a cohesive picture of what hate looks like, what injustice feels like, and what true power can be found in the idea of family and legacy.

...Jacqueline Youm, Adrienne Nelson, Frank Britton, and Scott Ward Abernethy...do an incredible of switching from one persona to the next...a deeply reflective piece...

The play is based on the book, *A Question of Freedom: The Families who Challenged Slavery from the Nation's Founding to the Civil War* by William G. Thomas III. There was a period in this nation's past when some enslaved people sued for their freedom. Shortly after the Revolutionary War ended until the Civil War began, there were enslaved individuals and families in Maryland in particular, who challenged the "way things were." Through court records, letters, and the recollections of their descendants, Thomas's book helps bring to light a moment in history that really did set the stage for the battle for freedom, or rather, the many battles for freedom that were to come.

Psalmayene 24's play takes Thomas's work and transforms it into living vignettes that give an even more human shape and form to historical documents. We keenly feel the anguish and pain felt by a sharecropper's daughter as she watches her father just try and rest for a moment to no avail in between backbreaking shifts. We watch as a woman recalls how some members of her family were tasked with standing in the field, waving a handkerchief so that they'd know where to spray the DDT. There are White characters reflecting on the concept of privilege and the tendency to gloss over the more "complex" portions of history—whitewash is the term most commonly used for this practice. We also see evidence of the unbelievable echoes of racist attitudes that have never fully vanished but tragically show themselves as alive and well today, time and time again, in different faces, different hate-filled words, and different unconscionable actions.

"Out of the Vineyard," part of the Freedom Stories Initiative spotlighting antiracist and social justice programs, presents an experience that harkens the work of the Tectonic Theater Project, but with what I can best describe as having a somewhat more intimate and personal feel. The four actors (Jacqueline Youm, Adrienne Nelson, Frank Britton, and Scott Ward Abernethy) portray an array of characters whose lives have all been touched not only by the freedom suits of the late 18th and 19th centuries, but also who are in some way a part of the impossible-to-solve equation that is the problem of racism today. They do an incredible of switching from one persona to the next. There is an almost ethereal quality inherent in the lines they draw between voices—so much so that you are nearly convinced they actually have different faces.

Director Tony Thomas, while orchestrating a piece with a very delicate moment-to-moment feel, also isn't afraid to stop time on occasion. There is very little linearity to the play and so time really does become relative in certain instances. The opportunities for reflection are thus abundant and, it would seem, deliberately so. Shartoya Jn. Baptiste's set design is sparse and works exactly as it needs to. The menacing feeling of isolation is pervasive, while chains hanging from the rafters function symbolically and also more practically in some scenes. Media Designer Luis Garcia adds the more visual facet of the story and gives audiences many of the prompts necessary to follow along with a tale that is just so hard to believe. "Out of the Vineyard" is a deeply reflective piece—an opportunity for people to learn something

more about the legacy of slavery in the U.S.; to learn something truly consequential about the descendants who are left with the unthinkable memories transcribed; and to learn about the realities of an aspect of American history that just doesn't get told.

Running Time: One hour and 30 minutes with no intermission.

Advisory: Depictions of slavery.

“Out of the Vineyard” part of the Freedom Stories Initiative, runs through September 24, 2023 at Joe’s Movement Emporium, 3309 Bunker Hill Road, Mt. Rainier, MD 20712. For more information and to purchase tickets, go [online](#). Read Susan Brall’s ‘A Quick 5’ interview with Psalmayene 24 [here](#).