

## Slavery's local past unearthed in 'Out of the Vineyard' at Joe's Movement Emporium

*The dramatic story of enslaved Africans' efforts to be freed by the courts of PG County, told in oral histories, choreography, and dazzling design.*

By **Gregory Ford** - September 12, 2023

*Out of the Vineyard*, now playing at Joe's Movement Emporium in Mount Rainier, tells the mostly unremarked and under-exposed stories of the meticulous in-court efforts by African Americans to resist enslavement: efforts that took place — often successfully — within the courts of Prince George's County, Maryland, prior to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation.

*Out of the Vineyard* is a lovely show to look at. A projection screen (media design by Luis Garcia) began by splattering a crimson version of the Milky Way as a textured red galaxy (blood?) across the upstage wall. It was dazzling. From beginning to end, the entire show *dances*, with director Tony Thomas' choreography (supported by assistant choreographer Pauline Lamb) taking the staging into that choreopoem territory memorably occupied by Ntozake Shange. (Some may recall being similarly transported by such previous Psalmayene 24/Tony Thomas collaborations as the Helen Hayes Award-recognized *Word Becomes Flesh*.)



Adrienne Nelson, Scott Abernethy, Frank Britton (standing) , and Jacqueline Youm in 'Out of the Vineyard.' Photo by Sabir Elmouakil.

The images in Garcia's animated backdrop also dance: bleeding, merging, and melting, sharing with the audience multiple footnotes and photographs of historical references that are relevant to the context of the story being enacted on stage. At certain points, shadow puppetry — silhouettes of the actors cast onto the screen — came into play. What happened with this backdrop was stimulating. It reminded me of the multilayered, constantly moving backgrounds for *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* and the graphic design of Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. This backdrop tracked the on-stage narrative, amplifying, illustrating, and commenting on it. While the backdrop did not distract attention from the actors onstage, it was always there if you needed a respite from the oral narratives. It was fun to watch. And I was fascinated by how the elegant and indecipherable writing seen in the screen projection was echoed in the costume design by Jeannette Christensen.

Shartoya Jn. Baptiste's set provided an effective container for the show's staging that also commented on both past events and the current state of affairs. For example, the set decoration included chains hung discreetly and symmetrically from above each side of the stage. Because of their decorative positioning, their function as tools of bondage, restraint, and ownership is invisible. Yet these chains are present throughout the performance, and while they may go unnoticed, they are just as operative in the lives and memories of the contemporary audience as they are for the characters in the play.

The ongoing interplay of the lives of the people involved in this racial history is first laid out through interweaving movements of the actors choreographed to Bobby McFerrin's "Sweet in the Morning." Throughout the show, the characters move from the stage and into the audience and back again, as if illustrating how the audience is included in this dance of history. The show ends by revisiting the interweaving choreography we saw at its opening.

*Scott Abernethy, Jacqueline Youm, Adrienne Nelson, and Frank Britton in 'Out of the Vineyard.' Photo by Sabir Elmouakil.*

Interviews with seven people (slaveholders and their descendants, enslaved people and their descendants) form the basis for the majority of the script. Four actors play multiple roles, all giving performances that illuminate the real-life persons they are bringing to life. Adrienne Nelson as white plantation museum director Julie Rose is appropriately outraged at the systemic silencing of the voices of enslaved Africans in the museum presentations. Scott Ward Abernethy as Will Thomas (author of the book on which the show is based) balances earnest recognition of his ancestors' role in slavery with his own uncertainty about what exactly he can do with this history. Both Frank Britton (as Chace Chester, a current Georgetown University student) and Jacqueline Youm (as April Nicole Green and her mother Ellen Jean Lewis James, descendants of Daniel Bell of Vicksburg, Mississippi) embody the silenced voices of enslaved folks and their descendants that are allowed voice in this piece. Youm's and Britton's performances are multilayered, nuanced, and tender.

Like Edna Ferber's *Showboat* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, *Out of the Vineyard* is big. it covers a lot of territory that is often romanticized, misrepresented, misunderstood, or just unknown. The play serves as a corrective to such misunderstandings of history as are rising in present-day United States. Playwright Psalmayene 24 and director Tony Thomas have done skilled jobs distilling from the book *A Question of Freedom*, keeping us aware of the humanity of this history and our connection to it.

*Jacqueline Youm and Frank Britton in 'Out of the Vineyard.' Photo by Sabir Elmouakil.*

While *Out of the Vineyard* stands on its own as a theatrical work, it is also part of a larger project called the “Freedom Stories” initiative, a two-year commitment to examine the local and national legacy of slavery. The program is a partnership among Prince George’s County Memorial Library System, Prince George’s Community College Center for Performing Arts, Prince George’s Office of Human Rights, and Joe’s Movement Emporium.

In support of that initiative, each performance is followed by a post-show discussion with guest facilitators. There are also several “Freedom Stories” events scheduled, including panels covering law, genealogy, and history.

Most of us don’t know much about the perversities, ironies, and stubborn cruelties that were perpetrated to maintain slavery’s hold in this country up to the present day. We know even less about the Africans in America who boldly challenged the court system to respond to their demands for freedom. The play tells some of the stories of how the descendants of people involved in those struggles — both formerly slaveholding and formerly enslaved — continue to cross paths today. Based on the book by William G. Thomas III entitled *A Question of Freedom: The Families Who Challenged Slavery from the Nation’s Founding to Civil War*, the play vividly demonstrates how, as William Faulkner noted, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”

Running Time: Approximately 90 minutes, with no intermission.

***Out of the Vineyard*** plays through September 24, 2023, at **Joe's Movement Emporium**, 3309 Bunker Hill Road, Mount Rainier, MD. Tickets (\$40 for general admission; \$25 for students, seniors, and youth) may be purchased **online** or in person at the door.

The program for Out of the Vineyard is online heree.

**COVID Safety:** Masks are recommended but not required.

### ***Out of the Vineyard***

Written by Psalmayene 24

Director/Choreographer: Tony Thomas

#### CAST

Scott Abernethy, Frank Britton, Adrienne Nelson, and Jacqueline Youm

#### PRODUCTION TEAM

Director/Choreographer: Tony Thomas

Set Design: Shartoya Jn. Baptiste

Costume Designer: Jeannette Christensen

Lighting Designer: Marianne Meadows

Media Design: Luis Garcia

Sound Designer: Nick Hernandez

Assistant Choreographer: Pauline Lamb

Stage Manager: Kate Kilbane

Casting: Chelsea Radigan

Graphic Designer: Briana Falwell

#### **SEE ALSO:**

***New performance work by Psalmayene 24 to open at Joe's Movement Emporium*** (news story, August 2, 2023)

***Black resistance to slavery in PG County inspires 'Freedom Stories'*** (by Gregory Ford, September 18, 2021)

#### **Gregory Ford**

Gregory Ford is an actor, director, and singer. As a Playback Theater practitioner he has performed with DC Playback and Synergy in Action. Under the auspices of Us Helping Us, an AIDS service organization, he

founded Positive Image Performance Project (PIPP), a Playback Theater company that specialized in providing a platform for people affected by the disease. He is a clinical practitioner of psychodrama and was the 2003 Neil Passariello Memorial Workshop presenter at the ASGPP conference. He currently performs with District Community Playback. You can read more of his observations on performance and the arts [here](#).