

ARTS

In Two New Plays, Psalmayene 24 Celebrates D.C.'s Talent and Confronts its History

Out of the Vineyard examines freedom suits through music and movement; Monumental Travesties examines the comedy in allyship.



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Louis E. Davis as Chance, Jonathan Feuer as Adam and Renee Elizabeth Wilson as Brenda in Mosaic Theater's production of *Monumental Travesties* by Psalmayene 24. Photo by Chris Banks.

Longtime D.C.-based writer, director, and performer **Psalmayene 24** continues to foster artistic rigor and spirited collaboration at a precarious moment for American theater. The current Andrew W. Mellon Foundation playwright-in-residence at Mosaic Theater Company, the artist, known as Psalm, creates works that vary widely in both form and source material. *Dear Mapel* (2022) was a deeply personal reflection on his relationship with his father, told through a series of epistolary vignettes, an example of how he combines joy and sincerity to tell difficult stories. A palpable love for storytelling and a desire to push audiences from their comfort zones run through his different plays.

Psalm had not one but two new plays premiere this weekend. Mosaic's *Monumental Travesties* is a searing comedy on racism and allyship with touches of absurdism and a dynamic cast. At Joe's Movement Emporium, *Out of the Vineyard* is a more conceptual play infused with movement by **Tony Thomas** and featuring an evocative soundscape by **Nick the 1da Hernandez**.

Out of the Vineyard is a theatrical summation of the Freedom Stories initiative, which uses interviews "to connect legacy to present day Prince George's [County] families and provide insight into the determination

and resilience of black people living in Prince George's County in the 1700s." It combines elements of dance and theater in an accessible and well-directed production with a rotating cast of characters. The little-known freedom suits are a fascinating source material—one many may not be familiar with and one that deserves further interrogation.

The play is largely based around **William G. Thomas III's** 2020 book, *A Question of Freedom: The Families Who Challenged Slavery from the Nation's Founding to Civil War*. Thomas' book introduces "freedom suits," pre-emancipation civil lawsuits in which an enslaved individual or family sued for their freedom. Four performers take up the documentary-inspired script based on interviews with the descendants of those involved in freedom suits. While hundreds of freedom suits may have been filed across Maryland and D.C., *Out of the Vineyard* makes clear that each one is unique and needs to be unearthed and re-historicized. Psalm's script demonstrates how individuals in the past took action to challenge slavery as a collective.

The staging of *Out of the Vineyard* is quite simple. **Scott Ward Abernethy, Frank Britton, Adrienne Nelson, and Jacqueline Youm** are attentive to individual characterization, with many charming personal touches and overall captivating stage presences. The play is not linear, but the actors rise to the challenge of interweaving these many narratives.

Two standout design additions further enriched the piece. The first was **Luis Garcia's** seamless series of projections that were as transient and revelatory as the story itself. The second was sound design from Hernandez, whose compositions ranged from hip-hop to hymns. (Hernandez pulls double duty as the sound designer for *Monumental Travesties*; easily becoming one of the most creative and artistically playful sound designers in D.C. right now, his work is not to be missed.)

Both plays interrogate history, though *Monumental Travesties* is the more contemporary of the two. Psalm noted in a preshow conversation that he hopes stories such as those told in *Out of the Vineyard* will help people see the need for stories like those in *Monumental Travesties*. *Out of the Vineyard* uses real-life accounts to demonstrate how civil action paved the way to unearth and directly challenge the institution of slavery. The word "action" is similarly crucial to the plot of *Monumental Travesties*, which interrogates performative protest as a means to reparation. An important historical insight moves between these two plays: Regarding emancipation, it wasn't *just* about Lincoln.

Monumental Travesties, directed by Mosaic artistic director **Reginald L. Douglas**, is a strange and mesmerizing play. Risky in its content but captivating in performance, the narrative begins immediately after Black performance artist **Chance (Louis E. Davis)** removes Lincoln's head from the Emancipation Memorial in Lincoln Park, which depicts the president standing over a formerly enslaved man. After Chance returns home to his wife, **Brenda (Renee Elizabeth Wilson)**, his eye roll-inducing White neighbor, **Adam (Jonathan Feuer)**, invades their house to stir up the plot.

Chance and Brenda reveal to the audience that removing the head from the statue was one of Chance's many performance protests, or what he calls "Actions." To say that the "actions" then escalate would not be a strong enough word.

As the play unpacks the symbolic weight of White supremacy in its many forms, Lincoln's disembodied head lingers in the backdrop, becoming a surprisingly complex plot device. Davis and Wilson are terrific leads, grounding Chance and Brenda's relationship with authentic challenges and intimacy, even within Chance's larger-than-life performance persona. Feuer committedly delivers some of the driest punchlines ever heard on this stage. The play veers toward absurdism but remains grounded, and the three actors work together to push the boundaries of what can happen in a one-room set. Psalm tends not to adhere to audience expectations, and extremism is put into sharp perspective as the script reveals the double standard of a racial reckoning.

Given their local themes and settings, it is especially meaningful to see these two plays (which are not at all connected beyond their shared playwright) in conversation with one another. As they examine the continued legacy of enslavement, each play is attuned to how history can be misinterpreted with explicit, and at times surprising, connections to D.C. Without being a study in contrast, *Out of the Vineyard* is as meditative as *Monumental Travesties* can be unnerving. These new works are a promising reminder of the talent in D.C. theater and each presents a sizzling confrontation with race in the United States.

Out of the Vineyard, directed and choreographed by Tony Thomas, runs to Sept. 24 at Joe's Movement Emporium. joesmovement.org. \$25–\$40. *Monumental Travesties*, directed by Reginald L. Douglas, runs to Oct. 1 at Atlas Performing Arts Center. mosaictheater.org. \$42–\$70.