

Painful Truths

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The Oregon Shakespeare Festival has waded in where angels fear to tread with a new play this season, "The Liquid Plain."

Part of a cycle of plays commissioned to explore moments of change in United States history, the play is set in 1791 in Bristol, Rhode Island, an important slave seaport, and explores a complex set of connections between, most prominently, two runaway slaves, a white sailor, and a notorious white slave trader. Its players guide the audience into moments of deep recognition that transcend some elements of the work that don't quite satisfy.

The story revolves around Adjua and Dembi, lovers who have escaped slavery and are eking out a living in the seaport while trying to arrange for passage to Africa. They find the body of an apparently drowned white man who returns to consciousness as they are removing his clothes in order to sell them.

The man, who they dub "Thomas," is suffering from amnesia, and for a brief time the balance of power is that he works for the two lovers as he grapples with his own unstable consciousness. But as his self-awareness increases, so does his attraction to Adjua and, accordingly, his conflicts with Dembi.

It turns out that "Thomas" is really a sailor named Cranston and his drowning was a failed murder attempt after he gave grand jury testimony



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM/COURTESY OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL
Adjua (June Carryl, left) and Dembi (Kimberly Scott) discuss their future in *The Liquid Plain*, an Oregon Shakespeare Festival play set in 1791 and based on the connections between runaways slaves, a white sailor and white slave trader.

a curious story. DeWoolf is based on a slaver known as "Captain Jim" who died a wealthy man after bringing an estimated 10,000 Africans to slavery in the New World.

In 1791, John Cranston, a sailor on one of Captain Jim's ships, testified to a federal grand jury that the captain had thrown a nameless woman overboard while she was still living because she had become seriously ill with what was thought to be smallpox. The grand jury indicted the captain for murder, but later testimony supported his actions as necessary to save the ship's cargo -- that is, the other slaves -- and he was ruled innocent and went on to greater wealth and power.

The real Cranston disappeared into history -- but, though well-played by Danforth Comins, the play itself doesn't satisfyingly resolve the questions raised by his place in the story. One wonders what motivated the real Cranston, who surely would have been of a lower class than the wealthy captain, to speak out against his actions. It's not hard to believe that, as portrayed here, he was more crude than a moral giant, a product of his time and class -- but the play relegates him to a type and doesn't wrestle with the complexities embedded in his story.

A scene late in the play includes an encounter between DeWoolf and a free black woman with connections to the drowned slave and to Adjua and Dembi. Though also not entirely satisfying, that later scene nevertheless contains some of the play's deepest moments.

Though it didn't strike me as a believable representation of an encounter that could actually have happened, the scene resonated as an imagined conversation in some alternate universe between a slave descendant and a man speaking from his internalized justification for his role in a horrifying system of oppression. Their exchange evokes a kind of agonizing recognition of how such thinking reverberates in our current consciousness.

Perhaps the celebrated playwright, Naomi Wallace, was overly ambitious in the number of themes her play took on. It's difficult, even with more than 150 years perspective, to make sense of how people reconciled what they did to their fellow human beings and why a small subset of whites showed themselves to be capable of higher thought.

Nevertheless, the play has moments of real poetic insight, and its players have entered into the work with commitment and intention. They usher the audience into the experience of reflecting on our shared past with a reverence for its complexity.

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against De Woolf, a slave ship captain. The play explores the connections between these characters as Adjua, Dembi, and Cranston plan their departure from the port and negotiate the balance of power between them.

The play contains a host of intriguing themes. How did African people of ingenuity survive in a context where the stakes were so high and nearly all of the options involved unimaginable risk? The play offers the opportunity to sit with those questions and dwell on what it meant for people like this to love and dream of a life together.

Adjua and Dembi exist in the interstices of a brutal culture and port economy that depends on trading people just like them. That people like them managed to love and aspire in a context that denied them the right or even the capability of doing those things is a reality worth contemplating. The play also contains some plot twists which I'll leave for you to discover but that locate the story of these two in some larger concerns of identity.

The story of Cranston doesn't fare quite as well. He and DeWoolf are inspired by two historical figures with



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