

The 2008-2009 Season is proudly presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly

The Whipping Man

By Matthew Lopez

Directed by Lou Bellamy

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SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE PLAYWRIGHT

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow
January 23, 2009 via telephone

Lein Walseth: I am starting from scratch with this piece, to be honest. I have read it and it's very lovely. I've read the study guide and some of the accompanying materials, and I'm curious to know how you and this play came to be a part of Penumbra's 2008-2009 season?

Lopez: The play had its world premiere at Luna Stage in Montclair, New Jersey in the spring of 2006 and Frankie Faison played Simon, the nominal lead in the play. Frankie had worked with Lou [Bellamy] on a production of *Two Trains Running* at the Signature Theatre in New York after he had done *The Whipping Man* at Luna, and he gave Lou a copy of the script and said, "There's this play, I really like it and I think you might like it too. Take a look at it." Lou did, and then I got a phone call from him, which is the best kind of phone call to get as a playwright, just out of the blue, "I like your play and I want to do it." They're rare. (Laughter) So, he called me up and it was a very simple conversation, it was like, "Hi, I read your play, I like it, we're going to do it at our theatre. Is that cool?" And I was like, "Sure!" And that's how it came to be at Penumbra. It was one of those great star-aligning moments. It got pushed back, I think, because Lou's directing calendar and teaching schedule was so full, so I'm happy that we're finally getting to do it, because it's been in the works for a while.

Lein Walseth: So, the play had its world premiere in 2006. Can you tell me a little more about its evolution and process?

Lopez: Yeah. It started as a very brief one-act play, around maybe 20 minutes in length. It was part of a larger piece, a triptych of one-acts dealing with race and identity, and it was actually the last piece that I wrote of the three. I think if you went back and looked at it in comparison to the other two, it was the least fully formed. It was, I hate to call it an afterthought, but it was the thing I wrote in order to have a triptych. I didn't really know these people very well, these characters, I just knew the given situation, which is, of course, the end of the Civil War coinciding with Passover that year. It was a wonderful historical coincidence.

I was starting on my writing career at the time, and I had sent it to a couple of places that had an open submissions policy. Usually theaters have a very strict firewall to keep writers away and only agents can get in. But Luna Stage has an open submission policy, and I sent some of my writing to them and they were interested in reading more of my stuff. So, that's when I sent them this play in its short form. Of all of the things that they read of mine, that one play, that at the time I had felt was very unfinished, they latched on to and suggested that I expand it to a full-length play. They suggested that perhaps the reason that it felt unfinished is because it was, and they offered their support. So, I spent quite a bit of time over maybe a year and a half, two years figuring out what the play was, what it wanted to be, and I had their support throughout the entire process. It was interesting writing a play that came from a smaller play. It didn't start like other plays with this germ of an idea and then you write a full-length play. It started as a smaller play. So, the challenge was keeping the intentions of the smaller play, keeping the intimacy of the smaller play, but all the while creating a full night of theater, so that's how it came about.

Lein Walseth: Wonderful. So, tell me about the impetus or catalyst for this specific subject matter. It seems that stories of Jewish people during African American slavery and the

Emancipation are largely absent from the history books, so I'm curious to know what sparked your interest in that particular topic.

Lopez: Well, because of my parents, I had always had an interest in the Civil War. It was engendered by my parents' interest, because they were Civil War reenactors. They started doing that when I was a teenager, which I thought at the time was *incredibly embarrassing* (Laughter from both). This was like, in the 90s when all those crazy Minutemen groups and those right-wing anti-government organizations were active, so as a teenager I was just completely embarrassed because I associated them with that. Of course the comparison couldn't have been further from the truth. Civil War reenactors are, I don't think they would argue with the appellation that most of them are amateur historians. They are really quite sincere and quite dedicated to re-creating history as it was. I kind of got sucked into it by that. As someone who had always worked in the theater (as a kid I was a child actor), I saw the drama and the theater behind it, which of course *it has*. I've always thought of the Civil War as this wonderfully low hanging fruit for great dramatic exploration. So, the general interest came from that.

One day I told my dad that I was looking for something to write on the Civil War that wasn't kind of melodramatic, that wasn't a bodice-ripper, and he pointed out this book on his shelf which was called *The Jewish Confederates* by Robert Rosen. It was a history of Judaism in the antebellum South, and I just devoured it. And you're right, there really is not a lot of history written about Jews in the South before and during the Civil War...I think I've probably found all of the books that have been written on the subject.

Even before I made the discovery of the fact that [General Lee's surrender at] Appomattox happened the day before Passover started that year, I was just fascinated with this idea of Jewish slave owning as a concept, how horrifically hypocritical it was, and it struck me as a wonderful topic for exploration. Slavery is referred to as our original sin, and it is filled with all different kinds of hypocrisies and moral games of twister that people played in order to excuse the practice. But, I found that there was *particular* discussion and angst and revulsion by northern Jews toward the idea of Jewish slave owning, and on the other hand quite a bit of moral twister going on in terms of the southern point of view of Jewish slave owning. For me that's drama. That's conflict. There you go.

I'm kind of fascinated, as a writer, with those moments when history as it is written ends. History is always these giant swings from big event to big event. Alan Bennett says in *The History Boys*, "What is history? It's just one thing after the other." And that is [how we understand] history, you know, "History is World War I and then the Treaty of Versailles and then World War II," and it's these grand, big, epic moments, but I've always been fascinated with the quiet that comes right after those big, grand moments, and I was looking to do something with that around the Civil War. How do you go from being a slave to being free? I mean, and it literally was, one day you were [a slave], one day you weren't...legally at least. How do you make that change emotionally, psychologically? It must have been quite daunting for everyone, but most particularly for the recently freed slaves. It's like waking up and the whole world has changed. So, I wanted to explore that notion of the quiet after the storm, when the real work actually starts being done.

So, all of that led me to discovering a happy accident. I don't even remember *when* the eureka moment was, but it certainly was a eureka moment when I discovered that Lee surrendered at Appomattox the day before. I need to go back and double check, but I'm almost positive that I'm right, that it was the day before the first day of Passover that year. It was just one of these discoveries that seemed so offhand, it was just matter of fact. It was just like, "Oh, and by the way, Passover started the next day." And I thought, "Well, wait a minute, wait a minute, are you

kidding me? Passover started the day after the Civil War ended? And no one has written this? Are you kidding me? No one had thought to write about this? No one thought to dramatize this? Well, I'll be the first!" (Laughs) It was like discovering an actual pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. "Surely someone else has seen this before." And no! So, I was like, "Alright, well I'll do it then." It just seemed like a no-brainer to me, I mean you'd have to be a complete idiot not to make it work (Laughs). So, I took all of those elements and I put them into this play.

Lein Walseth: So, it sounds like you're really interested in those intimate, quiet moments *and* this particular historical moment that no one has really dealt with *and*, on a larger scale, transforming our understanding of history and which moments are deemed worthy of our attention.

Lopez: I think that's true. I mean, history is written by the winners, obviously, but with the Civil War there were no winners, there were no losers, we were all Americans. We were Americans and we stayed Americans, and so the Civil War was a particularly different deck of cards. That change, at the end of it, is both *so well known* and also *so profoundly unknowable*. For every story that we know about that time, or about any time really, but particularly that one, there are all these histories that we don't know.

There is always the 'why' behind every play, every piece of art, every movie. Someone asked me about this play, "Why did you tell this story?" And to be quite honest, it wasn't always asked out of pure curiosity. I think people felt that there was some danger with the idea of portraying Jewish slave owners, the idea of portraying a Jewish family in a way that wasn't very, for lack of a better word, very sympathetic. And why? Why deal with it? I was asked this after a reading, "Why deal with it?" And I think my answer goes to answer the question that you just asked. I think it is the artist's responsibility, when they find dirt on the floor, to point out the dirty floor and not sweep it under the rug.

Slavery is *embarrassing* to Americans. It should be and it is. I daresay for the ancestors of slave owners it is very embarrassing. The majority of slave owners were Christian, it's true, but the idea of Jewish slave owning, like I said, was just so antithetical. It's a national embarrassment and Americans don't like to be reminded of their embarrassments. But one of the reasons that I wrote the play, one of the reasons that I'm drawn to the kinds of stories I'm drawn to is because we can't, as Americans, be afraid to face our collective shame. This is, in some ways, what I try to deal with in the play.

Lein Walseth: That sounds so much like the work we've been doing with the August Wilson Cycle - the idea that *we think we know what slavery is*. As a nation, we've heard that word so many times that it has become an ingrained concept that we just want to move on from. But really, we don't have any idea about those intimate moments and how it played out in people's day to day lives. Plays like Wilson's and *The Whipping Man* really reanimate and allow us to revisit these specific historical moments, which, as you say, is painful but necessary.

Lopez: Completely necessary. I have to say, any American writer, any dramatist, but especially anyone who attempts to write about the African American experience, owes a great debt to August Wilson. When I saw *Gem of the Ocean* on Broadway, I was writing *The Whipping Man*, and I almost didn't go because I was afraid of being faced with the master and thinking to myself, "I can never live up to that standard." But, what he dealt with in *Gem of the Ocean*, which I believe you did earlier in the season...

Lein Walseth: We did it last year, last spring.

Lopez: Right. Well, he dealt with it throughout the cycle, but in that play, which is the first play in the cycle I believe, right?

Lein Walseth: Yes. It is set in 1904.

Lopez: Yeah, and it is *right there* [at the end of slavery]. It rubs up against it, it is rubbed raw by it, and it was really inspiring for me to see how he dealt with it in such a personal way.

It also makes me think of *Persepolis*, the book and the film, and dealing with something that is so huge. These are things that would take an historian decades, centuries to figure out and sort through, and you deal with it through the eyes of a little girl. All of a sudden that huge monolith becomes somewhat knowable. And most people who read or saw *Persepolis* were not Iranian. How can you understand what it's like to be an Iranian, especially going through the [Islamic] Revolution? You can't help but understand it a little better when you deal with those big calamities as seen through the eyes of an average person. That's who the great calamities effect, you know. Jefferson Davis was *fine* after the Civil War. All of Lincoln's cabinet, they were *fine* after the Civil War. Everyone was fine after the Civil War but the soldiers who fought in it. They *weren't* fine. And the families who lost sons, *they* weren't fine. And those wounds, especially in the African American community, you know, I'm sure you have a question coming up about Obama, but those wounds are still healing, you know?

Lein Walseth: It is not an Obama question, but an idea that you touched on is related, and that is the larger scope of the African American experience. Penumbra's work centers on presenting this multitude of experiences, and I'm wondering how you see your play and yourself as a playwright fitting into this framework, and how, if at all, your own ethnicity influences your position in this regard?

Lopez: Well, first of all, I would say that I would never *ever* pretend to be an authoritative voice on the African American experience. I just got lucky. (Laughs) I had quite a bit of trepidation as to whether or not I *could* pull it off, and also *should* pull it off, whether or not I was the right person to do this. We are very sensitive about our own identities, we're very sensitive about how they are portrayed. I understand why Spike Lee felt so adamant that he make *Malcolm X* rather than Norman Jewison. And I don't think anyone could have made *Schindler's List* other than Steven Spielberg. There is something to be said for owning the property so to speak...but there is also something to be said for simply having the sensitivity and the intelligence to tell a story compassionately and intelligently, and if you understand human nature you stand a good chance of getting it right on the page, regardless of whether you are Puerto Rican, which I am, or black or whatever.

It did worry me that the play would be met with resistance, that I would be told either explicitly or implicitly that I didn't have the right to tell this story. But in the process of developing it at Luna it was never an issue. It was an issue for *me*, certainly, but it wasn't an issue for the audiences. No one was mentioning it, no one was saying it. So, looking for trouble, I brought it up at one of the talkbacks. I said, "Does it bother you that I'm white, or not African American?" And it was like, "No. No, you told the story well." So, it took me a while to get over that, but once I got over it I got *completely* over it and I owned the right to do it.

Growing up in the panhandle of Florida, even though I wasn't around as many Latinos as someone who grew up in Tampa or Miami, the identity that really shaped me was being gay. That was what made me really feel like an outsider. I never felt like an "other" for being Puerto Rican growing up. It didn't feel strange. Being gay certainly did. So I do believe that in many ways I was molded and shaped by that experience, which I believe probably gives me some kind

of sensitivity to what it's like to be "other," to feel like you don't belong, to feel disenfranchised, to feel like you don't have a voice. If there's anything in my experience I believe that's probably it.

Lein Walseth: You raise a really interesting issue, which is the triangulation between the playwright, the piece, and then the audience.

Lopez: Right.

Lein Walseth: Ideally, who do you imagine your audience to be for this piece, and how you think that might be different at Penumbra than Luna and any other places that this has been staged?

Lopez: Well, initially, because this was the first play I ever wrote, I was just too terrified to think of anything else other than getting the job done. I wasn't initially thinking of the audience, I was just writing the play. I didn't know what I was doing, so the audience was the least of my concerns.

I *was* worried that I wouldn't be accurate in my depictions of what it's like to be African American or Jewish though. And, while you can read books about the nuts and bolts of Judaism, the prayers, and the Seder, what you can't read about is nature – how your identity shapes your thinking and your reactions, and so I was concerned that I would alienate both Jewish audiences and black audiences. It was dangerous for me. I don't know if it would have been dangerous for someone else, but I felt it was dangerous for me to do this. I certainly don't want to be called an anti-Semite, I don't want to have my work being referred to as a minstrel show, and I don't want to fall into any of those traps of insensitivity or the inability to get it right.

What I found, in the play's previous production, was that both groups *came*, which was wonderful, but also that both groups identified so completely with it. It was this amazing marriage of two very different identities coming together in a theater and having the exact same experience, albeit two different ends of the same experience. I had little old ladies, both black and Jewish coming up to me after the play in tears, saying, "Oh surely you must be Jewish." "Oh surely you must have been raised in a very large African American community." It felt really good that the audiences identified with the play. So all those fears that I came into the process with, none of them were said, and none of them were felt. It was just the honesty of the situation and the honesty of the presentation.

It is not really my achievement, so much as it is the achievement of all art that is done intelligently and honestly: it underscores the idea that we're not as different as we think. The differences that separate us are not as large as what binds us. I have to say I'm proud of this play, I'm proud of the production that was at Luna. The reaction to the play was so *overwhelmingly* emotional and supportive, it truly was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life.

Lein Walseth: So, what is your hope for this production at Penumbra?

Lopez: First of all, I'm very excited to see this play again for the first time in three years – it's like getting to revisit an old friend. I hope the audiences have the same experience that the audiences at Luna did. I hope we're able to not only meet but surpass the last production. I know that I'm in expert hands, so I know the chances for that are pretty good.

I have always said that the play, for me, was in many ways about the beginning of the journey that African Americans have been on since Emancipation. It is that first painful step in a very long journey that certainly didn't end, but started a new chapter on the 20th of January this year. I hope, especially given this current moment in our nation's history, that people will look at the events of the election and our new president, and when they see the play will make a parallel between where we are and where we've been. I hope that audiences will see the play as dramatizing that first step that has landed us, most recently, with our first African American president. I'm very proud that this play is going on at this time, and I hope that it might capture this moment.