

**THE MOST  
SPECTACULARLY  
LAMENTABLE  
TRIAL OF  
MIZ MARTHA  
WASHINGTON**

**BY JAMES IJAMES**



**DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.**

THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE  
TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON  
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THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON was developed at the PlayPenn New Play Conference (Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director).

THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON was produced at Flashpoint Theatre (Thomas Weaver, Artistic Director) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in June, 2014. It was directed by Ed Sobel, the scenic and lighting design was by Thom Weaver, the costume design was by Marie Anne Chiment, the sound design was by Elizabeth Atkinson, the original music was by Daniel Perelstein, the props design was by Alice Yorke, and the stage manager was Jess DeStefano. The cast was as follows:

MARTHA WASHINGTON .....	Nancy Boykin
ANN DANDRIDGE .....	Melanye Finister
DAVY .....	Darryl Gene Daughtry, Jr.
PRISCILLA .....	Jaylene Clark Owens
SUCKY BOY .....	Steven Wright
DOLL .....	Taysha Canales
WILLIAM .....	Aaron Bell

## THE PLAYERS

### The Living

MARTHA WASHINGTON—70 years old. George Washington's widow. Mother of America. Slave owner.

ANN DANDRIDGE—Mulatto half-sister of Martha. House slave.

Chorus of Negro slaves, part backup singers, part storytellers.  
They are:

DAVY—House slave.

PRISCILLA—House slave.

SUCKY BOY—House slave.

DOLL—House slave.

WILLIAM—10–12-year-old boy slave. Ann's son.

### The Visions

ABIGAIL ADAMS—New First Lady. Not so nice. Played by Priscilla.

GEORGE WASHINGTON—30 years old. Dead president. Former slave owner. Played by Davy.

MR. LAWYER MAN—Ethnically ambiguous. Could be anything. Martha's legal counsel. Played by Sucky Boy.

MAD KING GEORGE—King of England. Played by Davy.

QUEEN CHARLOTTE—Queen of England. Pithy, game-show spokesmodel type. Think Barker's Beauties on *The Price Is Right*. Nice. Played by Doll.

THOMAS JEFFERSON—Hick. Played by Sucky Boy.

JACKY CUSTIS—Martha's son from a previous marriage. William's father. Raped Ann. Loves to dance. Played by Davy.

BETSY ROSS—Harlot and flag maker. Played by Doll.

SISTA LAWYER GIRL—Ratchit. Around the way girl. Very “urban.”  
Played by Doll.

SOUTHERN PLANTER—Short. Must have a top hat. Played by  
William.

SOUTHERN BELLE—Must have chest hair and a plunging neck-  
line. Played by Sucky Boy.

## SETTING

Christmas Eve, 1800, at the Mount Vernon Plantation.

### Notes on Laughter and Unison

“In slavery times the slaves were not allowed to laugh in many plantations. When the urge to laugh became irrepressible, the slaves had a ‘laughing barrel’ into which they would lean way down, place their head in the barrel and laugh, then go back to whatever it was they were doing.”

There is no laughing barrel in this play. When the script indicates laughter it is not light or fun. It’s more like showing one’s teeth. Especially in the case of the slaves. Their laughter is hostile. Loud! Laughter is a weapon.

Unison should be fully on one accord. It’s not overlapping. When more than one character speaks a line it should feel like a thousand voices. When “thunderous” is indicated it should shake the room.

### Note on Playing Slaves

Slaves in the Antebellum American South were whole, complicated, and complex people. Just. Like. You. Remember this. Thanks!

*“In the state in which they were left by the general, to be free at her death, she did not feel as tho her life was safe in their hands, many of whom would be told that it was [in] their interest to get rid of her. She therefore was advised to set them all free at the close of the year.”*

—Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, 21 December, 1800

*“A celebrated people lose dignity upon a closer view.”*

—Napoleon Bonaparte

*“Jackie Is Just Speeding Away  
[He] Thought [He] Was James Dean For A Day  
Then I Guess [He] Had To Crash,  
Valium Would Have Helped That Bash—[He] Said:  
Said Hey Honey, Take A Walk On The Wild Side.  
And The Colored Girls Go, Do Da Do Da do do do do”*

—“Walk on the Wild Side” by Lou Reed  
(the lyrics actually say she...but for this play...she is a he)

# THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON

*Virginia, USA. Mount Vernon to be exact, though not for long. The plantation of the nation's first president and his loving widow, Martha. December 24, 1800. Christmas Eve. Evening.*

*Upstairs Martha lies very very very sick in bed. Sweating. Coughing uncontrollably. Ann stands beside her bed with a basin of water, dabbing her forehead with a wet rag to cool her fever. Downstairs Priscilla, a slave woman, enters with a box of silver. She begins to polish. The action of the scene should move on...unaware of the action downstairs.*

ANN. Hold on now... It's gonna be alright ma'am.

MARTHA. Is it yet morning.

ANN. No ma'am. Just past dusk. My Lord! You burning up ma'am

MARTHA. George in from riding?

ANN. Ma'am Massa George is dead.

*Davy, a slave, enters Martha's bedroom.*

DAVY. She better now?

MARTHA. George?

ANN. You hear from the doctor?

DAVY. Sent someone done there. Say he ain't answer his door.

ANN. My savior. What we gonna do?

DAVY. She don't look good, Ann.

ANN. Go get me some more rags.

DAVY. Ann...what we gonna do if she don't get well—

ANN. —Go on now, Davy.

DAVY. She gonna die?

ANN. Get on out of here! Ain't you got no respect for the ill?

*Davy exits.*

MARTHA. Don't send him away.

ANN. That was Davy ma'am. He came to see that you doing well.

*Again downstairs. Doll enters. A slave woman not unlike Priscilla. She enters with a bucket and brush and begins scouring the floor. Sucky Boy enters, a slave man. He almost steps where Doll is washing.*

DOLL. Shoo!

SUCKY BOY. Terrible night to die. Eve of the Savior's birth.

DOLL. She been like that for three days.

SUCKY BOY. Ann up there with her now?

DOLL. ...Mhm...

*Doll continues to clean. Sucky Boy sits on the table and watches. Davy enters with a stack of firewood. He makes several trips in and out of the room with wood. The stack gets higher and higher. This continues through the remainder of the scene.*

SUCKY BOY. She weren't hateful.

DOLL. Weren't righteous neither.

MARTHA. My head! I can't see...

ANN. Ma'am...just close your eyes. Stop talking. Rest.

MARTHA. Is it morning? It's so bright.

*Beat.*

I been good to you Ann?

ANN. Been mighty fine to me.

MARTHA. ...*Ring-around the rosie...pocket full of posies...*

ANN. You not in your right mind... Stay with me ma'am.



MARTHA. *Ashes Ashes...*

ANN. Shhhhh...

MARTHA. *Ashes...ashes...* What's the rest of that?

ANN. Rest of what ma'am.

MARTHA. That... *Ashes, Ashes...Ashes, Ashes...* I can't...I can't remember anything.

ANN. Ma'am...you sick...you should be quiet now. Save your strength.

MARTHA. *Ashes...ashes...They all fall down.*

*She has a coughing fit.*

ANN. See now...you need to be quiet.

MARTHA. Are you going to stay with me?

PRISCILLA. They gonna free us all?

DOLL. Don't know. Massa Washington's will say when she die. That's all I know.

PRISCILLA. Well I sho wish she would make up her mind about whether she gone live or die.

SUCKY BOY. —She weren't no mean woman.

PRISCILLA. I didn't say that.

SUCKY BOY. Y'all talkin' like she in the ground! She weren't mean to none of us.

PRISCILLA. (*Remembering a moment of kindness.*) No...I guess she wasn't.

MARTHA. My head.

*Martha swoons. She is out cold.*

ANN. Ma'am...Ma'am! Wake up Ma'am. Ma'am! Sucky Boy! Sucky!

*Ann runs downstairs. All the slaves look to her. They all rise. Waiting for the news. Is she dead? This should feel like a climax of this melodrama. Overlapping, falling one on the other. Like a waterfall.*

SUCKY BOY. What is it?

DOLL. What happened?

ANN. Run down Doc's house!

PRISCILLA. She dead?

ANN. She fainted! She ain't coming to. Sucky Boy go!

SUCKY BOY. Yes'em.

*Sucky Boy exits quickly.*

DOLL. (*Flatly. Matter-of-fact.*) Won't be long now.

ANN. Doll, you gotta ungodly streak in you.

DOLL. (*Hard facts.*) She not gonna get well. Doctor ain't home.

DAVY. You been up there tryin' to nurse her. We can't make her better.

PRISCILLA. We might as well get ready for that.

ANN. This ain't in our hands.

DAVY. Think we oughta pray or something.

ANN. That's a nice thing Davy. We all should.

*Davy bows his head. They all bow their heads. They all begin to whisper prayers. They are soft. They slowly become more serpentine. Breathily. Their volume rises to a chant of sorts. Hushed but insistent. It becomes a prayer meeting.*

THE CHORUS. (*Variouly and overlapping.*) Bless her Father. Heal her body! Make her strong. Oh Father God we know You are able. You alone have the power to bring her back to herself. Jesus we need You! Heal Missus Washington. Breathe Your healing word into her! Give her the strength to live. We askin' You Lord. We implore You! Hallelujah! Glory Father! You got the power Father God! We askin' You! We askin' You!

*This intercession becomes a cacophony of noise. Lights out on the slaves. All is still.*

*William enters Martha's bedroom. He is a slave child. Martha is sleeping in bed. William stands beside Martha's bed and stares at her. He climbs on her bed and gets very close to her face. Martha wakes up. She is suddenly quite well. She stares at William.*

WILLIAM. (*Gently. Almost concern.*) You dyin'?

MARTHA. No. Well I don't believe so. Who are you?

WILLIAM. William.

MARTHA. Ann's son. You're not supposed to be here.

*William begins to jump up and down on the bed.*

Excuse me... Stop. Stop that! Stop that jumping! What are you doing here?

WILLIAM. You dreaming.

MARTHA. Dreaming?

WILLIAM. Yep! Dreeeeeamin'. S'why I'm here. Guess we got a while to be free then, I reckon. Where Massa Washin'ton?

MARTHA. Passed away. Could you please stop jumping on my bed.

WILLIAM. Yes.

MARTHA. Thank you.

WILLIAM. He in Heaven?

MARTHA. Who?

WILLIAM. Massa Washin'ton.

MARTHA. Oh...wellyes. He is.

WILLIAM. Thankful he's there.

MARTHA. That's a good boy.

WILLIAM. I'm just waitin' on you.

MARTHA. Me?

WILLIAM. Dey say...when you die, we gonna get our freedom.

MARTHA. Who is they?

WILLIAM. Everybody.

MARTHA. They say that?

WILLIAM. Yes'em. Say Massa Washin'ton put in his will when you die we gonna get free. 'Sthat true?

MARTHA. Yes. But... How did you find out about—

WILLIAM. —We know everything. So...we jus' waitin'.

MARTHA. Well...that *is* the state of things.

WILLIAM. Suppose so.

*Beat...*

You my...Auntie Granny, ain't you?

MARTHA. What?

WILLIAM. My auntie granny. My momma is yo' sister. My daddy

# THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON

by James Ijames

2 men, 4 women, 1 child

The recently widowed “Mother of America” lies helpless in her Mount Vernon bed, ravaged by illness and cared for by the very slaves that will be free the moment she dies. As she begins to slip away, she falls deep into a fever dream of terrifying theatricality that investigates everything from her family to her historical legacy.

*“Ijames has crafted a superbly written, emotionally compelling, and morally challenging play... We are never made comfortable in the world of this play, which looks dead-on at America’s original sin. It challenges by chasing down the guilt of all involved, even the most hallowed and revered of founders. This exceptional new work will have legs to run on for as long as America exists.”*

—**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

*“...an extraordinary dark comedy about slavery in America... [a] theatrical discovery of the best kind—a terrific script not to be missed...”*

—**DCMetroTheaterArts.com**

*“...[A] bold and theatrically bright new play... Ijames lets his imagination loose with MIZ MARTHA. The result is a skewered history that, like satire through the ages, has the ring of truth...”*

—**NewsWorks.org**

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