



BEHIND THE SHEET

BY CHARLY EVON
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DRAMATISTS
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*for Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy,
and all the other black women
who go unnamed in the history books*

BEHIND THE SHEET received its world premiere at the Ensemble Studio Theatre (William Carden, Artistic Director; Sarah A. McLellan, Executive Director) in January 2019. It was directed by Colette Robert, the scenic design was by Lawrence E. Moten III, the costume design was by Sarah Woodham, the lighting design was by Adam Honoré, the sound design was by Fan Zhang, and the production stage manager was Fran Acuña-Almiron. The cast was as follows:

PHILOMENA	Naomi Lorrain
DINAH	Jehan O. Young
SALLY	Cristina Pitter
MARY	Amber Reauche Williams
BETTY	Nia Calloway
BENJAMIN/LEWIS	Shawn Randall
GEORGE	Joel Ripka
JOSEPHINE	Megan Tusing
SAMUEL/EDWARD	Stephen James Anthony

BEHIND THE SHEET was originally commissioned and developed by the Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science & Technology Project.

author's note.

When I was a kid, I hated history class. Too many dates to remember. Too many wars. And if I mentioned a topic from class to my father, I got too long of a lecture. I never expected to be someone who would read an article about a historical figure and then go down a google rabbit hole to learn more. I certainly didn't expect to then feel compelled to write a play based on what I had read.

But here we are.

I find history fascinating now—especially because it is often messier and more complicated than I expected, when I get down to it.

J. Marion Sims figured out a way to fix fistulas, but he did so by working on enslaved black women who weren't allowed to own their bodies. These two facts are intertwined. As a person with a uterus, I am intimately acquainted with the speculum. After I first read about Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy and J. Marion Sims, I was shocked to learn how that tool came to be.

As I delved more into the history, I was also reading more about gynecology today. In the later stages of writing this play, a number of articles came out discussing black maternal mortality rates. As of the day I'm writing this note, I, as a black woman, am four times more likely to die of pregnancy-related concerns than white women. The history revealed to me a through line to today, as even recent studies have revealed that white medical students often believe black people don't experience pain to the same degree as white people. I think it is important to know and explore history because it can reveal to us how we arrived at present situations.

As I write in the epilogue, this play ultimately is fiction. Many details are real, but some are not. In some aspects the play is true to the realities of slavery and in other ways it deviates. I have listed some resources in the back that were integral to my writing and that I hope you will look at to learn more about this particular story. I hope the play makes you go home and do further research and reading—not only about the history of gynecology but also about how race continues to affect the field of gynecology.

I hope this play makes you question power, notions of consent, and history and how we remember and portray it. Ultimately, I hope this play helps you, us, remember the women who were integral to the growth of gynecology.

—Charly Evon Simpson,
2019

characters.

PHILOMENA, black, enslaved, pregnant, an assistant to George in the operating room

The black characters often call her Mena. The white characters often call her Philo, which is pronounced like Fill-Oh

DINAH, black, enslaved, diagnosed with a fistula and is brought to George for help

SALLY, black, enslaved, has a fistula

MARY, black, enslaved, has a fistula

BETTY, black, enslaved, assists George when Philomena no longer can

LEWIS, black, enslaved, in love with Philomena
(doubles with Benjamin)

GEORGE, white, a plantation owner and doctor

JOSEPHINE, white, George's wife

SAMUEL, white, George's assistant, a doctor in training
(doubles with Edward)

BENJAMIN, black, a slave of Edward's
(doubles with Lewis)

EDWARD, white, a nearby plantation owner, Dinah's owner
(doubles with Samuel)

place & time.

1846 before the interlude and 1848 after.

notes.

On ages: Life expectancy was different in the 1840s. Maturity, youth, deterioration of the body, and more could be shown by having a range of actors in their late 20s–40s. Dinah is the oldest of the black women. Philomena is a few years younger than Josephine. George is old enough to have had a failed practice.

On setting: We see a number of locations around George's Alabama plantation: a makeshift waiting area—possibly separated by a sheet, a room where operations happen, slave quarters, Josephine's room, George's study, and after the interlude, a sick house.* All of these areas can be just slightly hinted at. A table and some chairs can go a long way.

On bodies: Just because the examination that Philomena goes through is traumatic does not mean that the actress playing Philomena should go through a traumatic experience during the process of this play. There is no reason for the actresses playing the black women to ever be nude or actually touched violently or sexually. It is the suggestion of touch, the sound of touch, the implication of touch that is the most important. We will believe the pain it causes.

* A sick house is a mini hospital that is made out of coarse and cheap materials. It should have a lot of windows/doors and an opening at the top for ventilation and plank floors for easy cleaning.

BEHIND THE SHEET

prologue.

*Philomena, Dinah, Sally, Betty, and Mary stand in profile.
Perhaps they are in silhouette or in shadow.
We don't see them as clearly as we would like.
They move their bodies like they are being examined.
Like they are being prepared for auction.
Like they are getting their mugshots taken.
Eventually they face forward.
One leaves.
Then another.
Then another.
And then it is just Philomena there. Visibly pregnant.
She walks into the light.
She looks out at us.
She opens her mouth to speak.
And then there is the sound of a yell from offstage.
Philomena turns to look towards it.
She looks at us.
And then she rushes off.*

one.

A very small section of a room, marked off by a sheet. A waiting area of sorts.

There are a few candles in the room, to light it, but it is pretty dark.

There is an older black man, Benjamin, sitting in a chair on the side. He stares off into the distance.

After a few moments of quiet, there is a groan that comes from the other side of the sheet.

Philomena enters from behind the sheet. She has a basin. She looks over to Benjamin. She nods and walks offstage. We hear her pour the contents of the basin out. She walks back in.

BENJAMIN. Is she all right?

PHILOMENA. She's not dead if that's what... She's fine. In a way.

BENJAMIN. He is the best doctor for miles, they say. The best for women.

There is another groan, which silences them.

It is louder. And shriller.

Benjamin stands as if wanting to go in.

PHILOMENA. They almost done.

Sit back down.

Don't want them to think something.

He sits.

On her way back toward the groans, we notice that she has blood on the front of her dress.

Benjamin notices.

Philomena looks down.

Oh. It don't mean nothing.

It's just a little.

Looks like a lot.

BENJAMIN. She got daughters. Back on the plantation. She got—

PHILOMENA. She lucky to still have her daughters with her.

BENJAMIN. Yes.

Philomena goes to leave again.

Can you tell me what's going on?

A quick moment.

Philomena looks in the direction of the groans.

PHILOMENA. She has a problem a lot of women get. A fistula.

BENJAMIN. A fistula?

PHILOMENA. She had a long labor, I take it.

BENJAMIN. Yes.

There was no cry or nothing when...when she finally came out. It was five days and then she came out cold.

PHILOMENA. That happens.

BENJAMIN. I know.

PHILOMENA. That baby musta been trying to get out with all her might and that fight between 'em—between her and that baby left her with a hole. A hole in her woman's parts.

BENJAMIN. That's why she keeps dripping and hurting... that smell...

PHILOMENA. Yes. Dr. Barry is trying to fix the holes.

BENJAMIN. He'll fix her?

PHILOMENA. Only time will tell.

A moment.

The baby. Was it yours?

Benjamin goes to answer but—

GEORGE. (*Offstage.*) Philomena!

PHILOMENA. Excuse me.

Philomena exits.

And then there are some noises.

Footsteps.

EDWARD. (*Offstage.*) Are you sure? I don't want to have to trek back to pick her up.

GEORGE. (*Offstage.*) She'll need some time to heal up from the birth first, but then I'll be able to use her. She is a good candidate for it.

EDWARD. (*Offstage.*) My wife will be upset to lose her.

GEORGE. (*Offstage.*) Tell your wife that I'll hopefully have her back to you all very soon.

George enters.

He is sweaty and has a rag that he uses to wipe his hands.

Edward follows him out.

Philomena and Benjamin stand off to the side, heads down.

EDWARD. I assume you'll be able to give me a good deal.

GEORGE. Of course. Of course. You are doing me a favor by entrusting her into my care.

EDWARD. I didn't know what to do with her otherwise.

GEORGE. Not much to be done with them in this state.

EDWARD. How one can figure out a woman's body is beyond me.

GEORGE. When I was asked to look at the first few women with this, I told their owners not to contact me. It is not like we doctors study the woman's body...

EDWARD. It seems impossible to do.

GEORGE. Some would say that, yes.

Anyway, I didn't see a way for them to be fixed.

EDWARD. What changed your mind?

GEORGE. Mrs. Merritt from Mountain Brook. She came in extreme pain and it became rather obvious that the pain was coming from her woman's parts. She had an altogether different problem, but by working on her, I realized I could get a much better look at a woman's parts and therefore fistulas. I was reminded of a lecture I went to some years ago and I replicated what I remembered: I had her place her knees to her chest and then, well, I inserted two fingers in her and applied some pressure. Almost immediately she expressed relief.

EDWARD. Still seems rather...invasive.

GEORGE. It is, unfortunately. But I realized that I could get a much better look while using something to push her open. So I made a tool to help me see inside, a speculum I call it, and told a few owners I'd spoken with to send their damaged slaves over. And for the first time, I could really see the problem. I realized that it didn't seem impossible to fix after all.

But if it were possible to fix without acquainting myself with a

woman's body, I'd be sure to do it that way.

He laughs.

EDWARD. This is why I stick to plantation life. Cotton. Tobacco. That I understand.

GEORGE. Ha. Well, I try to get an understanding of both with the little land we've got here, but medicine seems to keep taking me away. Without Josephine, the rest of the plantation would crumble.

EDWARD. Well, George, I hope you solve the issue. It is a shame the affliction causes us to lose good workers and breeders.

GEORGE. Well hopefully, in time, that will not be the case.

Philomena?

PHILOMENA. Yes?

GEORGE. Can you see to it that the slave—

BENJAMIN. Dinah.

Everyone looks toward him.

Sir. Her name is Dinah, sir.

Edward eyes Benjamin.

We know what that look means.

GEORGE. Philomena, can you see to it that...Dinah...is brought over to the slave quarters?

Find her a place to rest. Get some help from the others.

PHILOMENA. Yes, sir.

GEORGE. And then I'll be back to arrange the rest of the day.

Philomena gives George a small look and then exits back behind the sheet.

EDWARD. We'll get out of your hair then, George.

GEORGE. Sleep well. Give my love to Anna.

EDWARD. I shall.

Benjamin, let us go. Now.

George and Edward shake hands.

Edward and Benjamin exit.

George stands alone. He takes the rag from his shoulder and drops it to the ground. Then he exits.

BEHIND THE SHEET

by Charly Evon Simpson

5 men, 6 women

In 1840s Alabama, Dr. George Barry is on the verge of a miraculous cure: treatment for fistulas, a common but painful complication of childbirth. To achieve his medical breakthrough, Dr. Barry performs experimental surgeries on a group of enslaved women afflicted with the condition. Based on the true story of Dr. J. Marion Sims, the “father of modern gynecology,” BEHIND THE SHEET remembers the forgotten women who made his achievement possible, and the pain they endured in the process.

“...deeply affecting... [BEHIND THE SHEET] takes on cumulative power in its steady, clear-eyed depiction of a time when it was a given that pain would be borne uncomplainingly by human beings regarded as chattel. ...Like its core of heroines...BEHIND THE SHEET...resists the natural urge to shout in righteous defiance. ...[It] may be a quiet play. But its echoes are thunderous.”

—The New York Times

“...emotionally powerful and gracefully written... The ailing women, who bunk together in the doctor’s ‘sick house,’ are rich dramatic creations... what Simpson does so beautifully is show us how these women overcome their suspicions and envy to find support in one another.”

—TheaterScene.net

“...a brave, unflinching piece from top to bottom. The amount of thought and care that went into its development is evident... Simpson must be commended for giving a voice to the voiceless...”

—TheFrontRowCenter.com

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