

Wallace becomes Frederick Douglass

By John Paul Keeler

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It is rare for an actor to impersonate a Historic character definitively either in a one man show or a three act play. The performance of Phil Darius Wallace in "Becoming Frederick Douglass" in Walking the Dog's production at Space 360 does just that.

REVIEW

The conception of the work by Wallace and the text from Douglass writings adapted by Melania Levitsky result in a perfect theatrical dove tail of sharing personal drama.

"Becoming Frederick Douglass" is aflame with compelling acting by Wallace in a full hour performance without intermission that builds like a great symphony to a triumphant finale and a standing ovation. In the course of the performance Wallace projects the horror of slavery reminiscing as Douglass like a terrified little boy. He then goes on to show how the slaves to bear the burdens of their lot sang their poignant songs. It was a superb theatrical stroke for Wallace to sing those songs while acting out the heavy load of slavery. His resonant speaking voice was even surpassed by his singing voice. It struck a remembrance of all

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the great Black singers one has heard in the 20th Century: Roland Hayes, Marion Anderson, Camilla Williams, Simon Estes, Shirley Verrett and Leontyne Price. Wallace tied in to that noble sound that vibrates suffering and faith. When Wallace declaims the comparison to the Jews in their exile and slavery not being able to "sing their songs" and voices how the black people lightened their burden in song, a visual and oral impress reached out to the audience. One of the best Douglass statements is that "slavery destroys the central principle of human responsibility" and even today and in every age there seems to be slavery in various forms. There has been Genocide in Armenia at the beginning of the 20th Century, The Hitler and Stalin murderous impress on humanity and recently Rwanda. This compelling drama of American slavery seen through Frederick Douglass

seems contemporary in that it is a call to brotherhood rather than greed and enslavement.

It is something to think of a fugitive slave becoming the greatest abolitionist of his time and having the nerve to walk up to the front door of the White House wanting to see President Lincoln. And he did become a friend of the

president and after the assassination, Mary Lincoln the Presidents widow gave him the President's walking stick. The chiaro scuro of the various speeches and the description of the Overseer held the audience spellbound with a release coming with the recitation of the poetry verses "God speed the day when human blood shall cease to flow! In every clime be understood The claims of human brotherhood.... and change into a faithful friend each foe...God speed the hour, the glorious hour when none on earth shall exercise a lordly power".

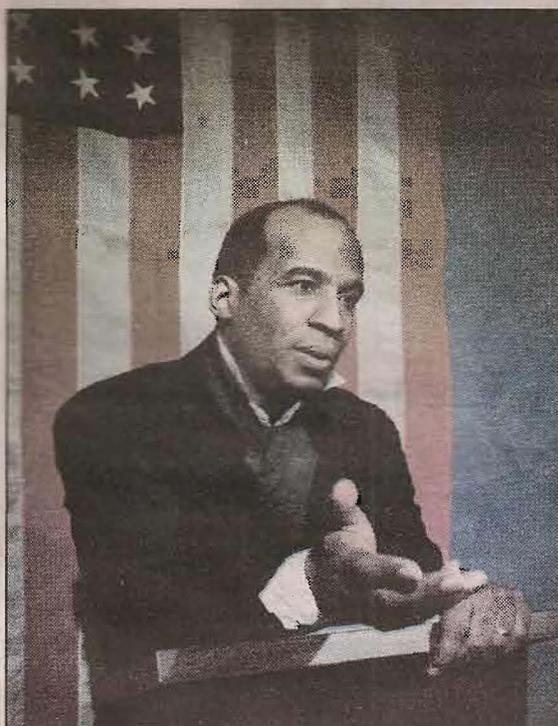
This riveting hour of theatrical truth should be seen by citizens of the twin counties especially over this celebratory season.

It is interesting to note that Douglass convinced Lincoln that there should be a Black Regiment from the North fighting for the Union and Lincoln created the 54th Massachusetts Regiment; and five Columbia County black heroes of the Civil War Charles Witford, Henry J. Carter, George W Prince, William Everson and Seneca Livingston are buried in the Old Hudson Cemetary. Two Confederate soldiers who swore allegiance to the Republic after the war are interred there also, all friends no doubt free in eternity!

One cannot say enough about the artful adaptation by Melania Levitsky of the Douglass writings into such a splendid performance, plus her sensitive direction and the music that enriched the evening.

Final performances are tonight and Saturday evening at 8 p.m. and a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m.

For more information visit wtdtheater.org.



Daniel Region

Phil Darius Wallace as Frederick Douglass