



Ed Swidey as Uncle Tom and Langston Darby as Simon Legree in EgoPo's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN (Photo credit: Jenna Kuerzi)

Posted in: [Professional Theatre](#) on June 3, 2013 at 4:03 pm

EgoPo Boldly Reconsiders the “Unfortunate History” of UNCLE TOM’S CABIN

Posted by [Debra Miller](#)



The ensemble of UNCLE TOM'S CABIN: AN UNFORTUNATE HISTORY by EgoPo Classic Theater (Photo credit: Jenna Kuerzi)

From the moment EgoPo Classic Theater announced that it would stage a new race-reversed version of UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, it has been the subject of much heated debate and controversy. Written in 1852 as a fervent abolitionist statement, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel would soon

become the racist stock of blackface minstrel shows, and, by the mid-20th century, the name “Uncle Tom” a disparagement. But recent scholars have re-examined the book's importance within the context of its antebellum era, and some have reclaimed it as an empathetic, humanizing, impactful cry for emancipation. This renewed interest in the story and its shifting reputation spurred EgoPo's bold decision to create an original adaptation to conclude its 2012-13 season on the theme of American Vaudeville, designed to confront racism, to engender discussion, and to foster the inter-racial empathy originally intended by Stowe.

EgoPo's artistic team has created a stunning design for the historical drama. Period-style costumes (Natalia de la Torre) and props (Kaitlin Kemp) contrast the finery of the slave-owners with the few drab and basic necessities of the slaves, all against the backdrop of an enormous—and



enormously ironic—American flag, expressive lighting (Matt Sharp), and a soundtrack of patriotic music and disturbing sound effects (Zachary Wiseley) that evoke the times.

Maria Konstantinidis, Rachel O'Hanlon-Rodriguez, and Anthony Martinez-Briggs portray a family of escaped slaves in EgoPo's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN (Photo credit: Jenna Kuerzi)

Among the most effective scenes in EgoPo's re-imagining, masterfully choreographed by Paule

Turner and directed by Lane Savadove, are the prologue—an outdoor gathering of the fully

integrated ensemble of black and white characters enjoying camaraderie in slow-motion stop-action sequences; and the opening, in which they rise en masse to watch Independence-Day fireworks. As the celebratory explosions morph into the gunshots and cannon blasts of the Civil War, their facial expressions change from excitement to consternation, they cower, and then slowly shift from one united company into two segregated groups, setting the tone for Stowe's narrative. Equally significant is the epilogue, with the entire desegregated cast again assembled before the flag, as they recite the unrealized ideals of liberty and justice for all, on which this nation was founded.

Ed Swidey and Langston Darby bring Uncle Tom and Simon Legree fully to life as the iconic central counterpoints of good and evil. Rachel O'Hanlon-Rodriguez is heartbreaking as child-slaves Harry and Topsy, while Maria Konstantinidis captures all of Eliza's maternal strength, nurturing, and protectiveness. Nia Ali is thoroughly angelic as the loving young Eva, and Tiffany Bacon is conversely vexatious as her spoiled, self-absorbed mother. Under Melanie Julian's virtuoso coaching, the fifteen-member cast dauntlessly tackles the accents and dialects inherent in Stowe's writing of their roles; Caroline Crocker is especially skillful and unflinching in her delivery of Chloe's and Mammy's lines, as are the African-American actors who must use the horrible epithets so casually spoken by the slave-owners. None of this is easy to hear or to watch, and it shouldn't be.



*Ed Swidey and Nia Ali as Uncle Tom and Eva in EgoPo's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
(Photo credit: Jenna Kuerzi)*

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this production is to ensure that the most appalling, brutal, and dehumanizing part of American history not be avoided simply because it's uncomfortable or unpleasant. The inconceivable suffering of generations of slaves, and the soulless abuse of fellow human beings by a dominant white class, should indeed make us very, very uncomfortable, and very, very angry, whether depicted in reverse race or true-to-character casting (which, in its realism, would have been even more unbearable for the audience to see and the cast to endure). EgoPo's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN will leave you horrified and sickened by man's inhumanity to man, both then and now; but that's the point, and it's a point that is strongly and clearly made.

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN: AN UNFORTUNATE HISTORY

Written by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Adapted by Lane Savadove and Glenn Odom

Directed by Lane Savadove

May 31-June 9, 2013

EgoPo Classic Theater

Plays and Players

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