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## Reworked 'Uncle Tom' triumphs



The cast of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at Plays and Players in South Philadelphia. (JENNA KUERZI)

When the Internet read about EgoPo Classic Theatre's reimagining of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: An Unfortunate History* in January, it issued a collective groan. The gimmick - reverse racial casting, white actors playing blacks, black actors playing whites - seemed designed to inflame. Was this some "post-racial" commentary on Obama's America? Was it EgoPo's attempt to fill a "Tom show" minstrel slot in their vaudeville-themed season? Director Lane Savadove fed speculation with naive blog posts claiming he had recently "discovered" the 1852 novel that has confounded and captivated public figures from Abraham Lincoln to Henry Louis Gates Jr., and whose title character's name Malcolm X slung at the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in one of the most divisive racial slurs of the 20th century.

So, how did all that work out for EgoPo? Well, as devout Tom might say, "judge not, lest ye be judged." The production works surprisingly well, and its gimmick looks a whole lot like evolution.

This adaptation by Savadove and Glenn Odom uses incidental choreography by Paule "Duchess" Turner (he also plays Mr. Shelby and bounty hunter Loker), and direct quotes from Stowe, echoing the novel's episodic nature with quick scenes that interweave the fates of its multitude of characters (slaves, slaveholders, traders, Quakers, children) with direct appeals to the better angels of the audience's nature.

This script uses 15 actors and, not coincidentally, it's the most racially mixed cast I've seen on a Philly stage, perhaps ever. Its set is simple: bales of hay, a few chairs, a platform and, as a backdrop, an enormous American flag with all 50 stars.

Cross-casting accomplishes several goals here. Savadove claims it encourages audience empathy, but I say if it takes cross-casting to foster empathy with the plight of enslaved humans, you're probably a sociopath. More important is the fact that it helps defuse discomfort early on. There's an inherent humor in watching this role reversal, at least at first, with black actors lobbing the N-word, or diminutive Turner addressing Ed Swidey's much-taller, thicker Tom as "boy." But Act Two signals a change in tone, with trader Haley (the outstanding Langston Darby, who doubles as vicious plantation owner Simon Legree) posing Stowe's central question just before intermission: Who is more to blame, slave traders or a national economy constructed atop slavery's unstable foundation?

By the time Darby's Legree sits, miserable, flooded in red light on his swampland throne, Tom dead at his feet - Mr. Kurtz by way of the Emperor Jones - we see the real triumph of this production. Traditional casting might have kept Stowe anchored firmly in the past, but by using slavery's metaphor, we see why that flag has 50 stars. Exploitation of illegal immigrants, de-unionization, Gitmo, Bangladesh, all reveal their roots in that peculiar institution.

Uncle Tom's Cabin

Presented by EgoPo Classic Theatre at Plays and Players, 1714 Delancey Place, through June 9. Tickets: \$25-\$38. 267-273-1414 or [www.EgoPo.org](http://www.EgoPo.org)