

Sai ya Kai yay!

Sunday, November 22, 2015

by Ty Collins



BLACK CULTURE is about freedom of expression and the gospel voice gives that free expression a vitality that surrounds and enfolds an audience, a community, and the world.

Look What A Wonder is Walter Robinson's gospel folk opera told in first person about the folk hero, Denmark Vesey (Horace Rodgers) and the 1820s' black Charlestonians who gather to celebrate the gift of Christian worship. The Vesey story from history gives an account of a free, black, skilled carpenter who bought his freedom after winning a lottery and masterminding an alleged slave revolt to kill slaveholders in Charleston, liberate the slaves, and sail to Haiti for refuge.

Vesey and one half-dozen slaves were rapidly judged guilty in secret proceedings by a city-appointed court and condemned by hanging on July 2, 1822. Robinson's vision for the Denmark Vesey folktale sets the hero at the center of a congregation of wailers and shouters in a praise house as the symbolic anchor for a cantata with gospel beat.

A group of chairs, music stands, and microphones are preset on the chancel of Circular Congregational Church for the dozen voices and piano accompanist (Carl Bright). Vesey, in cutaway tails, strikes an imposing figure from history, while the ensemble dressed in black contemporary dress, sways, claps, and finger-snaps rhythms to several arranged and contemporary gospel standards. The conventional theatre atmosphere dissolves into raw emotions of solos and ensemble singing. The "let's do church!" performance style is

the *sturm und drang* that mesmerizes the novice of such ethnic event plays, while the seasoned black churchgoer joins the ensemble in the call-and-response style that feeds the soul of spirit-filled congregants.



Horace Rogers

A one-page handbill listed the songs which helped the audience follow the narration and sequence of songs. The modern gospel gymnastics of young vocalists were more counterpoint to the storyline than support for the operatic theme or narrative. But what it lacked in a thematic core and logical progression of story cohesion, it made up for with sheer purity of the sounds that salvaged the black musical folk tradition in all its pure, heartfelt honesty. The voices were trained and untrained, sweet, melodic, and raucous. Intoned speech of staccato spoken word would have been a better option for the narrator's voices as Vesey orations, and the storyteller/accompanist enhanced the variation on the theme of word and song. Fortissimo energy and pianissimo moments were lost to vocals that encircled the domed rafters and crashed against the plaster walls far too often as soloists competed for audience approval. The Benedict College ensemble of voices suffered because of it. However, several soloists were outstanding and the audience applauded their artistry which overshadowed the spirited wailing. D'Jarvis Whipper-Lewis' lament was controlled and melodic. The acapella rendition of *After This Night*, the recitative between Vesey and his daughter, was a theatrical moment. *Answer My Prayer* by the lyric baritone was fluid, and the young child's appeal, *Pray for Me*, was worth the price of admission. The folk opera, *Look What A Wonder*, has moments of clarity. Ty Collins' The ball and chain of servitude that brought Vesey from the Caribbean to the Carolinas is a memory he never shared with his family. The unspeakable horrors of a free life and a family in bondage demanded that he book passage aboard a vessel to free his loved ones, but the memory of haunting cries for help by human cargo: Sai ya Kai yay! Sai ya Kai yay! Sai ya Kai yay! ("Let us

be free!”) became his sorrow song and farewell lament from this life as a free man daring to care for his family in 1822.

Look What A Wonder is a protest play against the epidemic of present day sexual slavery. The limited run at Circular Congregational Church Friday, November 21 and Sunday November 22 at 7:00 PM is one more reminder that Emmanuel AME Zion Church in Charleston stands as a messenger from the past securing the foundation for its purpose as Charleston’s reminder to let us all be free.

Look What A Wonder has a final run at Circular Congregational Church on Sunday November 22 at 7:00 P.M.

Sponsored by: Called to Rescue www.calledtorescue.org.zzxd