

ONSTAGE

# Play casts light on Southern Jewish slave owners

Set in 1865, 'Whipping Man' explores the nature of freedom.

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The thing about America's history with chattel slavery, aside from the fact a lot of people just don't want to talk about it anymore, is it continues to surprise us.

We're surprised by things that were always there in plain sight, but we looked right past. For instance, the 2004 novel "The Known World" by Edward P. Jones caused a stir

## THEATER PREVIEW "The Whipping Man"

Friday through April 7, times vary. \$39-\$45. The Alliance Theatre on the Hertz Stage, 1280 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 404-733-4650, [www.alliancetheatre.org](http://www.alliancetheatre.org)

for its depiction of African Americans who owned slaves. That same measure of shock greeted playwright Matthew Lopez's play "The Whipping Man" when it opened in New

**Slavery** continued on E7



Actors Jeremy Aggers (left) and John Stewart rehearse a scene for Alliance Theatre's upcoming production of "The Whipping Man," opening Friday. PHIL SKINNER / PSKINNER@AJC.COM

## Living & Arts



Left: Director Alexander Greenfield (left) works with actors Jeremy Aggers (seated), Keith Randolph Smith and John Stewart during a reading of "The Whipping Man."

Center: Director Greenfield said, "I always associated slavery with what other people did, what the bad guys did." Right: Smith (left) and Stewart play slaves with uncertain futures.

### 'It's OK for it to make you squirm'

#### Slavery

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York two years ago. It's the story of a Jewish Confederate soldier and slave owner who comes back to his Richmond, Va., home at the close of the war and finds two of his former slaves still there. Like African-American slave owners, Southern Jewish slave owners is a little discussed truth in large part because both were relatively rare.

In his play, Lopez has made the slaves Jewish as well, converted to the faith when they were children and perhaps more devout than their master. Now "The Whipping Man" comes to the Alliance Theatre's Hertz Stage this week. Previews begin Friday and the show officially opens the following week.

Guilt, blame and shame tend to stunt conversations about slavery, but here the discussion is engaging because the play's three characters share a measure of all three.

Nothing is quite as it seems. Lopez has written a how people embrace it and try to navigate it, or whether they allow old ghosts to immobilize and consume them.

"There is this cliché about writing from experience, that it makes things more authentic," said Alexander Greenfield, the play's director.

"But I think one of the reasons this play works so well is that while it could have been written by a Jewish author or an African-American author, it wasn't. (Lopez) is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in Florida.



Smith plays the character Simon, a slave with big post-war plans for his family. He said he had never heard of Jewish slaveholders before being cast in "The Whipping Man."

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"It was a period of history that fascinated him and a little-known fact of history that fascinated him. I think that's what elevates it from a good play to a great play. It takes some distance to write something like this."

The story is set during April 1865, a month when three events occurred: Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, essentially ending the Civil War; Passover started; and President Lincoln was assassinated. From there, Lopez imagined what might happen if a wounded Jewish soldier named Caleb DeLeon returned home in the midst of those events.

"History has always fascinated me," Lopez said via email while on break from a writing session for the HBO series "The Newsroom."

"The Civil War angle happened when my brother started doing Civil War re-enacting when he was a teenager. My parents quickly followed suit. I found it horribly embarrassing. But they dragged me along from time to time to observe and I couldn't deny the

theater of it all."

Keith Randolph Smith portrays the older slave, Simon, who is the lead in a harrowing reunion scene between the three characters. Portraying Simon has presented Smith with a host of challenges, not the least of which has been learning to speak Hebrew, he said. But like Greenfield, he had never heard of Jewish slaveholders before being cast in the play.

"It was just a revelation to me," Smith said. "It had never dawned on me that this could be possible."

Greenfield grew up in

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Matthew Lopez  
Playwright

metro Atlanta, attended Jewish schools until high school and attended Temple Sinai in Sandy Springs before he moved to New York City. He didn't know about the legacy until he was an adult.

"I always associated slavery with what other people did, what the bad guys did," said Greenfield.

But slavery was the fabric of the South and anyone living there at the time was affected by it. In 1860, there were more than 31,000 Jews in the South and about 200,000 nationally, said Stuart Rockoff, director of history for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, Miss.

Jews served in both the Confederate and Union armies.

Rockoff said that while their numbers weren't large, it should not be surprising that there were Jewish slave owners — or abolitionists.

"Particularly when you look at a city like Charleston," Rockoff said. "In Charleston, a significant number of Jews owned slaves, because by the 1850s they had become

part of the city's elite."

The play's two black characters share their owner's faith. They are the ones who cobble together a Seder with what little they have left in a once-grand home greatly damaged in the war.

While many slaves did adopt the religion of their owners, there is little hard evidence to support how many slaves were converted to Judaism, Rockoff said.

"But there was a bill in the constitution of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (founded in 1750) in Charleston that banned black converts from joining the congregation," Rockoff said.

"I would think that you wouldn't need to pass a rule if there weren't some who'd been converted."

About a year ago the Alliance gave a reading of the "The Whipping Man" for an audience of rabbis and other select members of the local Jewish community.

The play's topic, along with its chilling portrayals and descriptions of the era's horrors, prompted the Alliance to gauge public reaction in advance.

Rabbi Ron Segal of Temple Sinai in Sandy Springs attended. (Coincidentally, he officiated at

Greenfield's bar mitzvah.)

"Good theater should be provocative and it's OK for it to make you squirm in your seat a little bit and this play certainly does that," said Segal.

"The fascinating thing of this play is that it challenges every preconceived notion of who's keeping the religion and who is a Jew. It asks, is there equality in our society even today?"

Segal expects the play's premise to be difficult for some to accept.

Yet he said he would recommend it to his congregation if for no other reason than to bring new energy to the Passover story, a story of deliverance from oppression and knowing what liberation truly means.

"The point I was hoping to make with the play is that no one is immune from the stain of slavery," Lopez wrote.

"We own that collectively as Americans. Even those of us whose families were not in the country yet. It is 'our story,' not 'someone else's story.'"

"And sometimes facing the more shameful aspects of our history makes us uncomfortable. (But) it makes for a more responsible citizenry and a stronger country."

