

*The Georgetown Theatre Company presents:*

## ***North, South, Race and Class***

*A Wednesday evening staged reading series of 19<sup>th</sup> c plays illustrating issues troubling our society in the years leading up to the Civil War;  
7 p.m. at Grace Episcopal Church, 1041 Wisconsin Ave NW*

***Free parking with  
Grace validation at the  
Georgetown Park Mall  
underground garage,  
southwest corner of M  
and Wisconsin***

Theatre was much more of a popular entertainment in the 19th century, and plays reflected concerns about race, gender and regional identity. Three of these popular early-mid 19th century plays are typical of what ordinary Americans saw onstage. The fourth play is the earliest known drama by an African-American dramatist, former slave William Wells Brown.

Although DC boasts many events illuminating our history before and during the Civil War years, none (that we are aware of) deal with the confusing ways in which people of varied backgrounds saw themselves as part of a regionally, culturally and ethnically

diverse nation. This project will illuminate questions of individual identity and overlapping group identities that fed the tensions leading us to Civil War.

### **WHAT WE FEARED**

#### **A Bloody Rebellion**

**February 8**

*Obi, or Three Fingered Jack* (by Thomas Hailes Lacy) is set during a slave rebellion in Jamaica. The legend of Three-Fingered Jack reputedly has its origins in a true story, circa 1780. The play is based on a pantomime of 1800, which featured the famous African-American actor Ira Aldridge. The late-18<sup>th</sup>- early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw slave rebellions in Haiti and in the USA. The horrifically violent nature of the Haitian rebellion caused panic in slaveholding southern states.

### **WHAT WE ADMIRE**

#### **Heroic and Noble Characters in Chains**

**February 15**

*The Gladiator* (by Robert Montgomery Bird) tells the Spartacus story. Although championed by Abolitionists, the story of Spartacus was also popular with classically educated southerners; slaveholders refused to acknowledge the similarities between the noble gladiator and enslaved people of color.

### **WHAT WE SENTIMENTALIZED**

#### **Anti-Slavery, and yet Pro-South**

**February 29**

*The Octoroon* (by Dion Boucicault) was one of the biggest hits of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American theatre. It is the story of a beautiful mixed-race girl raised as white; when her father dies in debt, she is sold as property. Like the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Octoroon* sensationalized the peril of a young slave woman at the hands of an evil white man. The play also serves as an apology for aristocratic slave-owners by presenting them as kindly and broad-minded, while the

lower-class white characters were depicted as vicious, lecherous immigrants. These stereotypes persisted in Southern literature until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **WHAT THE SLAVES THOUGHT**

**How Slaves saw Issues of Race, Regional Identity and Class** **March 7**

*The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom* (by William Wells Brown) is the only play in this series that was not widely performed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Written by an escaped slave who claimed that it was partly autobiographical, *The Escape* was widely read and discussed in Abolitionist circles. There is no reliable information on whether or not *The Escape* was performed during Brown's lifetime; The Georgetown Theatre Company presented *The Escape* at Discovery Theatre in 1998.

Each reading will be followed by a discussion led by a literature/history scholar. The scholar will lead the audience in examining how Americans -- particularly DC residents -- understood themselves in the context of being "American". How they saw themselves as being either from the north or the south; as male or female in a slaveholding nation; as part of a slaveholding or abolitionist tradition; as either white, a free person of color, or a slave.

A \$10 donation is requested as admission to each reading.

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