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Nat Turner Earnest but Drawn-Out

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 5th, 2016

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“I tire of metaphor. We are talking in circles,” cries lawyer Thomas R. Gray to Nat Turner, the leader of an 1831 slave revolt, towards the end of Nathan Alan Davis’s earnest but drawn-out play *Nat Turner in Jerusalem*, now at the New York Theatre Workshop. Gray could have been speaking for me. The dry work so repetitively examines the motives behind Turner’s infamous insurrection involving a small band of his followers killing over 50 white citizens of Southampton, Virginia, that it feels long even at 90 intermissionless minutes.



Rowan Vickers and Phillip James Brannon in *Nat Turner in Jerusalem*

Credit: Joan Marcus

We are in Tuner’s cell on the night before his execution and Gray, an itinerant lawyer, is bent on extracting the names and plans of future similar conspirators from the condemned man. With the information, the financially strapped Gray can collect a fortune as well as a place in history and the goodwill of the nation. But the prisoner refuses to comply, instead preaching of hearing voices from God and attempting to make Gray understand the crushing injustice the charismatic Turner wished to correct. There are alternating scenes between Turner and his simplistic guard (played by the same actor as the lawyer) where the latter offers a more pragmatic view of events.

There is a potentially engrossing play here. Turner and his bloody, abortive attempted revolution have been fodder for rich dramatization including a novel by William Styron and the upcoming, highly touted film *The Birth of a Nation*. Davis’ premise is promising and rooted in a fascinating scholarly debate. Gray recorded and secured a copyright for Turner’s confession and published it claiming it was in the rebel leader’s own words. But Gray’s accuracy has been challenged and the play imagines what really transpired between the two men.

There are a few chilling moments offering startling parallels to contemporary America. “Do you know what happens when white people get scared?” Gray asks Turner, sounding uncannily like a 21st century observer commenting on police abuse of African-Americans. But Davis keeps returning to the same points and dragging out the final confrontation. Megan Sandberg-Zakian attempts to inject variety into the proceedings by moving set designer Susan Zeeman Rogers’ simple platform into different positions along a strip of playing space with the audience seated arena style on either side.

Phillip James Brannon captures the title character’s intelligence and passionate anguish, but he has been directed by Sandberg-Zakian to hit his dramatic high notes early in the evening and has nowhere to go. His final exit before the gallows has little impact since he’s been close to screaming

all night. Unburdened by such heavy theatrics, Rowan Vickers delivers more shaded and complex work in his dual roles of Gray and the surprisingly sympathetic guard.

Sept. 16—Oct. 16. New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Tue, Wed, 7 pm; Thu—Sat, 8pm; Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 2 and 7 pm. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. \$69. (212) 460-5475. www.nytw.org.

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