

I CAN'T BREATHE

by Steve Romagnoli



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Cover art by "Sanchez Stanfield"

"My heartfelt thanks to all the students at Bedford Hills Women's Prison whose profound insights and deep thoughts have directly informed and inspired this play."

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Declaration of Independence

"No, I am free, and have, I trust been made a child of God by the means."

Ona Judge (enslaved by George Washington)

“I regret that the attempt you made to restore the Girl (Oney Judge as she called herself while with us, and who, without the least provocation absconded from her Mistress) should have been attended with so little Success.”

George Washington (Enslaver)

“America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.”

Frederick Douglass

“The revolutionary war was led by some rich white boys who got tired of paying heavy taxes to the king. It didn't have anything to do with freedom, justice and equality for all.”

Assata Shakur

If you were enslaved during the 18th century, would you consider the Founding Fathers any differently than an Auschwitz inmate would consider Eichmann or Hitler? Most of the Founding Fathers were enslavers. Hamilton, who claimed to be against slavery, married into a slave-holding family and bought slaves himself. Even the minority who never owned slaves, were complicit in our American Holocaust and signed the Declaration of Independence, a document that did not condemn slavery, did not protect the rights of women, and infamously ends with a racist reference regarding “merciless Indian savages.” How might a Holocaust survivor feel to see bridges and highways named after Nazi leaders? Or to hear such names celebrated in statues and songs? Hitler Highway? The Eichmann Bridge? The Goring Monument? Mengele, the Musical? What does it mean to have the “Father of our Country” use the power of the presidency to hunt down his young runaway slave for her “ungrateful” escape? Or to have our third president, Thomas Jefferson, use his enslaved teen as a concubine while subsequently enslaving their children? Our great American capacity for selective memory has, for the most part, chose to dismiss these truths.

The archetypal painting, “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” has hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art for more than a century. In it, a Black soldier is rowing beside the General’s knee. Who is this man? Many have claimed him to be Prince Whipple, enslaved by William Whipple, one of the Founding Fathers. Recent research, however, has shown that neither one was with Washington at the time of the crossing. Other Black men have been suggested including James Brown, an aide to Washington, who founded the saloon now called the “Ear Inn” in NYC. It’s hard to get a bead on the truth when the painting was created over seventy years after the fact and, like most mythic remembrances, is riddled with inaccuracies. But the one fact we can be sure of is that there were Black men who fought for “freedom” during the war only to remain enslaved after it was won.

Inspired by that unknown Black man in Washington’s boat, this play attempts to explore the ongoing adoration of the so called, “Founding Fathers,” and our complicity in adhering to those myths that seek to subvert the truth at the expense of all those who have suffered and continue to suffer. The cast is composed of five Black actors and one white actor. In alternating scenes, the enslaved Black characters double their roles as Martha Washington and three of the Founding Fathers. The one white role is based on the historic figure, James Callender, who was traditionally disparaged as a drunk “scandal-monger” and dismissed by historians despite of (and because of) his speaking truth to power and revealing the underlying corruption and mendacity of Washington, Adams, Hamilton and Jefferson.

CHARACTERS:

(Six With Doubling Roles)

Back-Room Saloon

ONA JUDGE: African-American, light-skinned (freckles), Washington's escaped slave.

HERCULES POSEY: African-American, dark-skinned, Washington's enslaved cook.

JAMES CALLENDER: white scandal-monger, wears an odd, heavy leather hat.

CAPTAIN BROWN: African-American, freeman, owner of waterfront saloon.

JACKSON JACKSON: African-American, freeman.

JUPITER JONES: African-American, blind slave owned by his wife.

Washington's Drawing Room*

MARTHA WASHINGTON: played by Ona actor.

THOMAS JEFFERSON: played by Captain Brown actor.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: played by Jackson actor.

JOHN ADAMS: played by Jupiter actor.

*** BLACK AND WHITE ROLES SWITCHED:** Martha and the "Founding Fathers" can be re-costumed and/or made-up at the discretion of the Director as long as it can facilitate swift scene changes. (Callender and Hercules are the same as in earlier scenes).

SET: Depending on budget and designer's vision: can be a simple single set or more complex, with dual locations and/or mixed media. In any case, must allow for quick transition between Saloon and Drawing Room.

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE (May 24, 1796)

As the last of the audience is taking their seats, the African-American spiritual, "Mary Don't You Weep," fades in. Towards the end of the song, houselights fade to black with the rise and fall of heavy wind through the trees...

The sound of thunder mingling with far away drums...

Downstage center, Ona Judge appears standing in a pool of wavering moonlight, the darkness coming and going at the whim of swirling clouds.

ONA

(light softly fading up)

I know you there...

(light flickering to black)

I can feel you...

(lights up)

But you there alright. You been doggin' my steps ever since I started steppin'. Who I am, who I was, who I gonna be---it's all right there, all laid out crystal clear while I only see through a glass, darkly... Is you a demon?

(lights fade)

Speak!

(lights up)

You an angel? Can I be saved? Maybe the two of you is there. Maybe more.... Maybe a whole host of shinin' angels and fiery demons... All rushin' in and out of my soul like a whirlwind through the trees...

(lights fade)

Every last leaf a twistin' and a tremblin' in hope and fear...

(lights up)

You speak, but you say nothin'.

(lights fade)

HERCULES

(in darkness)

Oney?

(lights up, they embrace
and share a moonlight
kiss)

Who was you talkin' to?

Don't really know. ONA

You be chirpin' merry? HERCULES

Not a drop for me. ONA

HERCULES
(lights fade and then up
again)
Look like another big blow comin' along soon.

ONA
The calm before the storm and I's a fly in a tarbox fearin' where the winds
might take me.

HERCULES
What you talkin' about?

ONA
You know it. I done talked about it how many times now.

HERCULES
Empty the bag.

ONA
Tomorrow eve.

HERCULES
It's so then.

ONA
You can come with me.

HERCULES
I ain't ready to go just yet.

ONA
Yeah...
(lights fade)

HERCULES

I love you

(lights up)

I love you.

(kisses her, she indulges
before abruptly pulling
back)

ONA

What of it? What is it? Love... If anything, it's as pretty but as fickle as
the unsteady moon.

HERCULES

You got it all inside-out.

ONA

What?

HERCULES

What you see betrays what really is.

ONA

Goin' on now, with all your riddlin'.

HERCULES

There's nothing unsteady about the moon.

ONA

Is that so.

HERCULES

That's right. The moon, she's always there, always shinin', whether you
able to see her or not. Cloaked by light of day or clouds by night, the
moon don't waver, don't ever go away. Just like my love. Neither the
two are never gonna stop shinin' for you. Only thing inconstant about the
moon, about my love, is the things that darken the glass you be lookin'
through.

ONA

You always had guts in your brain.

HERCULES

I just be sayin' it like it is.

ONA

Come with me.

HERCULES

I ain't ready just yet.

ONA
To leave Alice.

HERCULES
She has nothing to do with it.

ONA
She your wife.

HERCULES
Let's just leave that alone now. You know what's what with her and me.
Right now just ain't the right time. When I'm ready to go, I'm gonna go.

ONA
Ready? When will you be ready? If ever. You a bird in a gold cage,
Hercules, struttin' your roast beef clothes on Sundays only a step ahead of
the lash on Mondays.

HERCULES
Master never did once correct me.

ONA
Never not a first time for the lash. Even for you.

HERCULES
True enough. The thing is, there's something yet I still gotta do here.

ONA
What you talkin' about?

HERCULES
I don't rightly know. It's just something that I can feel. I'm telling you,
Oney, I can feel it deep down in my bones.

ONA
You and your bones...

HERCULES
Not just my bones. It's the bones of my ma and my granny and her ma
and her granny, goin' on and on, all the way back... And they all cryin'
out, all calling to me but I just can't quite hear it. But it's there and it's
then and it's here now too. It's something that I'm a part of that I can't
hear or see or even rightly know of. But I can feel it, Oney. And it's a
powerful feeling that scares me half to death too.

ONA
You a very strange man, Mr. Hercules Posey.

HERCULES

Maybe you right, maybe it all ain't nothin' neither.

ONA

I didn't say anything about it being somethin' or nothin'. I just said it strange. In fact, I said it was you that was strange. And I'll stand by that.

HERCULES

Whatever it is, it's comin' soon. Taking shape right now as we speak, gatherin' itself up like a great mountain of a wave rushing from far away across the sea, growing bigger and stronger and wilder, while they all sleepin' safe and sound in they beds, cannot but even dream of it...

ONA

Sounds like you dreamin' of death and destruction.

HERCULES

It ain't no dream, Oney.

ONA

In that case, I'll be glad to be gone when it do get here.

HERCULES

You are determined. That's one thing most clear.

ONA

My waitin' is over. My mind is made. By tomorrow eve I'll find my golden bridge or else be dragged back here for air and exercise.

HERCULES

Don't speak of such things.

ONA

It's either one or the other.

HERCULES

You will get away. I feel it in my bones.

ONA

And never to see you again.

HERCULES

I will find you.

ONA

How can you ever find me when I don't even know myself where my gold bridge lies or where it will lead me.

HERCULES

I have a plan.

ONA

That ain't nothin' new.

HERCULES

Look... When you find your freedom, you lay low and you bide your time... Then, when it's safe enough to travel, you go back to New York City. You remember where the Hudson River lies?

ONA

Of course.

HERCULES

Downtown, someplace not far from the riverbank, there is a saloon for white folks owned and operated by a freeman who is known to walk on the water.

ONA

What the hell you talkin' about?

HERCULES

I'm saying there's a nigga there who can walk on the water and---

ONA

Ain't no nigga born able to walk on water.

HERCULES

How you know?

ONA

Anyone who could do such thing would walk his ass straight back to Africa.

HERCULES

Maybe some of 'em did just that. I heard talk of such things from my granny.

ONA

What you heard was wishful thinking. Only natural for a slave to believe or wanna believe in gettin' some kinda freedom. Whether it be across the water or across the sky. How many times you hear about the old folks who could rise up and fly away to freedom? You ever see a nigga fly?

HERCULES

I never did see it myself but I do believe it could be possible.

ONA

Could be. Or could be not.

HERCULES

Either way, what I do know, is that he be one powerful nigga, a nigga not only to be trusted, but somebody not even a cracka can correct, short of killing a cracka his self. And he might even be able to get away with that too!

ONA

How can that be?

HERCULES

'Cause our very own Massa, General George Washington his royal self, blessed him so. Made him a freeman with a free lifetime pass against all trials and tribulations.

ONA

I don't have time for this nonsense! I'm leavin' tomorrow eve, Hercules!

HERCULES

Lookee here... This nigga---maybe he walk on water, maybe he don't. But what I do know is he a freeman who own a saloon servin' whites with a room around back just for black folk.

ONA

What's his name?

HERCULES

The nigga in the boat.

ONA

That ain't no name.

HERCULES

That's what he be called.

ONA

What name he born with?

HERCULES

I don't know.

ONA

Nigga can walk on water but he don't have no name?

HERCULES

He do have a name but I can't recollect it...

ONA

So how am---

HERCULES

It don't really matter. His name is secondary.

ONA

Secondary to what?

HERCULES

To the fact that he the nigga in the boat. That's the important thing. And that's what everybody used to call him. And, I suspect, still do call him.

ONA

This is no time for you to be playin' around, Hercules.

HERCULES

I'm not playin'. He world famous for being the nigga in the boat.

ONA

Who walks on the water.

HERCULES

That's right.

ONA

If he walks on water, then why the hell he need to be in the boat?

HERCULES

He don't. He the nigga in the boat 'cause every boat that the General ever be in? That nigga right there, right beside the commander of the Continental Army!

ONA

And why was that?

HERCULES

As long as he in the boat---this boat, that boat, any damn boat he be ridin' in---ain't possible for it to go down. Some say, without him, the General woulda lost the war.

ONA

Sound like he one magical nigga!

HERCULES

You can mock all you like.

ONA

Listen to what you be sayin'!

HERCULES

I realize it do sound a bit odd.

ONA

More like milkin' the pigeon.

HERCULES

Whether it true or not? That's not really the point here.

ONA

What the point then?

HERCULES

The point is: this so called nigga in the boat cannot be molested by no man, white nor black, because he was given his freedom and the blessing of the General and President of the United States of America. This is a man you can trust with your life, Oney.

ONA

You sure on that.

HERCULES

I sure on it. All you gotta do is find him and tell him where you be stayin'. He will keep your secret come hell or high water. And as soon as I make my escape, I'll see him and come straight to you. That is, if you haven't found somebody new.

ONA

Or expended and pawed by a cold cook.

HERCULES

You got many more years to live, Miss Oney Judge.

ONA

How you know?

HERCULES

I can---

ONA & HERCULES

feel it in my bones!

HERCULES

I can! And these bones don't lie.

ONA

(takes out a red scarf)

I made this for you.

HERCULES
(takes scarf)

It's beautiful.

ONA
(puts it around his neck,
kisses him)

Each stitch a prayer for freedom. Maybe one day I'll be seeing you wear it in a place far away from here.

HERCULES
(hands her a cloth napkin
holding Johnnycakes)

I made these for you. For your journey.

ONA
Johnnycakes. Don't nobody make Johnnycakes like you do. But how you know I be leavin' when you were makin' them?

HERCULES
When you left me the sign to meet tonight, I could feel it in my bones that you were goin'. So I made 'em so you could remember me along the way.

ONA
I don't need no Johnnycake to remember you by. But I thank you for these and for everything that you did and do for me.

HERCULES
Ain't nobody like you, Oney.

ONA
I need to ask you a favor before I go.

HERCULES
Sure.

ONA
Tomorrow eve, they got a big banquet planned.

HERCULES
I know all about it. I be the one doin' the cookin'.

ONA
Yeah. And that's why I need you to make sure things go awry, to make the meal stretch out as long as you can. The longer the whole thing lasts, the more time it will give me.

HERCULES
I can do it. But it will play odd. I always be punctual when it comes to makin' the meals.

ONA

And blowin' your own horn.

HERCULES

Don't you worry. I'll make sure you get another hour, maybe two. You can count on me.

ONA

Thanks. I get nary a breath alone from that surly boots bitch. Oh, how I hate her. Except when she eatin' or asleep, she be ridin' my ass with a smile of bile and vexation.

HERCULES

I never did see what the General did see in her.

ONA

Maybe his eyes as bad as his teeth.

HERCULES

He ain't got no teeth.

ONA

I know that. They not real though.

HERCULES

Oh, they real alright. They just ain't his. Most come from ol' Jack---back when he was young Jack.

ONA

The barrel maker?

HERCULES

That's right. He got a few more from slaves ain't here no more. All dead and gone now.

ONA

I never knew that. I heard they was made up of animal bone and horns and such.

HERCULES

Some parts, yeah. But the teeth in the front? They come from ol' Jack.

ONA

Don't seem to fit too good. He always be movin' his mouth like he ate a bushel of peppers.

HERCULES

That's when the slave teeth be bitin' his tongue.

ONA

Go on, now! But really, they ol' Jack's teeth?

HERCULES

Yes. The front ones. I can't believe you didn't know that.