The Gospel According to James
A Review Essay

MODUPE LABODE

The Gospel According to James by Charles Smith
Directed by Chuck Smith
World Premiere, March 22–April 10, 2011, Indiana Repertory Theatre,
Indianapolis
Janet Allen, Artistic Director; Steven Stolen, Managing Director

In most ways, James Cameron was an ordinary sixteen-year-old in the
summer of 1930. His family had settled in Marion, Indiana, where
Cameron attended school, made money shining shoes, and tried to keep
up with the older teenagers he admired. Two days in August changed his
life. A lynch mob killed two of his friends, among the twenty-one victims
of lynching in 1930. James Cameron was seized by the mob but eluded
death, making him one of the very few people to survive a lynching.¹

The verifiable events that led the crowd to lynch two young black
men are few.² On the evening of Wednesday, August 6, 1930, Claude

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¹Twenty African Americans and one white person were lynched in 1930. Douglas Eckberg,
"Reported victims of lynching, by race: 1882–1964," in Historical Statistics of the United States,
Table Ec251-253.
²James Cameron, A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story (1982; Baltimore, Md., 1994); Cynthia
Carr, Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America

Deeter, a twenty-four-year-old white man, was shot at a lovers' lane near the Mississinewa River; he died the following day. An eighteen-year-old white woman, Mary Ball, was at the scene of the shooting and was reportedly sexually assaulted. Police quickly arrested three African American youths—Abram Smith, Thomas Shipp, and James Cameron. Charged with shooting Deeter and raping Ball, the young men were held in the Grant County jail. On the evening of August 7, thousands of white people gathered at the jail. The mob broke into the cells, beat Shipp, and hanged him from the jailhouse window until he was dead. They then found Smith, beat him violently, dragged him to the county courthouse, and hanged him from a tree. Some members of the mob retrieved Shipp's body and hanged him next to Smith. The crowd returned to the jail, seized Cameron from his cell, and beat him savagely as they prepared to hang him from the tree in front of the courthouse. For reasons which remain obscure, the crowd released Cameron after an unidentified man vouched for his innocence. Authorities returned him to the jail. The crowd remained around the bodies until early the next morning. Lawrence Beitler’s well-known photograph captures this scene. In the glare of the camera’s flash, a group of white men, women, and children stands, amused and excited, while the bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abe Smith hang in the background.

These events form the starting point for a new play, *The Gospel According to James*, by Charles Smith, professor of playwriting at Ohio University. In 2006, the Indiana Repertory Theater (IRT) commissioned Smith, who had previously written other plays for the company, to create a work based on the lynching. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation supported the project. Under the direction of Chuck Smith (no relation to the playwright), the actors and the author used their residence at the IRT to refine the writing and acting before the premiere. The results of their work became clear when the play made its world premiere in Indianapolis on March 22, 2011. André De Shields, playing the adult Cameron, led a talented
troupe of actors who brought nuance and ambiguity to the script. Linda Buchanan's set was spare and elegant; features that referenced wallpaper in a funeral home in one scene evoked trees along a river bank in another. Simple moves of furniture and astute blocking sufficed to suggest the many scene changes and time shifts required by the script.3

The Gospel According to James invites audiences to consider the complex ways in which people make meaning of their lives, and the often-profound divergences in the memories of individuals and communities. Like a professional historian, Smith challenges his audience to consider the contradictory and often unreliable evidence of a single event. As an artist, however, he is able to pursue avenues of inquiry beyond the reach of conventional historical scholarship.

The IRT staff recruited historians, scholars, and community leaders—often joined by cast members—to facilitate conversations with the audience after several performances. These talkback sessions gave audience members an opportunity to explore interpretations of the play and share their reaction to the intense performance. At the invitation of the IRT, I was a co-leader of a talkback session on March 29, 2011.

Smith's program notes make it clear that he considered several themes and strategies for dramatizing the events surrounding the Marion lynching. Even before he began writing, however, Smith decided against reenacting the lynching on stage—a decision that relieves both actors and members of the audience of the responsibility of becoming voyeurs or accomplices to a restaged murder. Still, the playwright makes serious demands of his viewers. Not allowed to dismiss Marion's residents as irredeemable racists, viewers are led to empathize with the local citizens, but the empathy stops short of finding excuses for the lynching.4

The play revolves around two people at the center of the Marion lynching, Mary Ball and James Cameron. Over the following decades, Ball and Cameron took different approaches to recalling the event that defined their lives. Mary Ball remained an elusive figure for much of her life. She was nearly invisible in the historic records and apparently left

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3After its initial run, the production transferred to Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater, where it ran from May 14 through June 12, 2011.

no memoirs. Instead, almost immediately after Claude Deeter's shooting, other people began telling her story. Police and journalists claimed that she had been sexually assaulted by a black man. Newspapers consistently described Ball as a respectable white woman; some asserted, without proof, that she was Deeter's fiancée. At Cameron's trial, Ball testified that she had been raped, but to the disappointment of prosecutors, she was unable to identify her assailant. After the trial, she largely disappeared from public view, and died in California in 1987. Writer Cynthia Carr tracked down several of Ball's relatives, but none could (or would) contribute substantive information about the lynching. Many were unaware of this aspect of their relative's past.

James Cameron, by contrast, would eventually gain renown as a survivor of lynching. Eleven months after the lynching, he was convicted of being an accessory to voluntary manslaughter and served four years in prison. Following his release, he lived in various places in the Midwest, married, and finally settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he raised his family. Over the decades, as Cameron tried to make sense of his survival, he concluded that he had been spared from death in order to make the public aware of the horrible consequences of racism. A visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial left a deep impression. Cameron saw parallels between lynching and the Nazi persecution of Jews and left Israel impressed by the center's commitment to preserving memories of the Holocaust. In 1982, he self-published his memoir, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story*. *Ebony* magazine and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* publicized his life story and message. After Cameron successfully petitioned the state of Indiana for a pardon, the public increasingly viewed him as a respected elder whose experiences provided unique insight into racial reconciliation. In June 2005, Cameron was among the invited guests to witness the U.S. Senate's formal apology for failing to pass any law criminalizing lynching. He died the following year at age ninety-two.

Smith's script brings together Mary Ball, now calling herself Marie, and James Cameron in Marion some fifty years after the lynching. James

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Actors André De Shields and Linda Kimbrough as the adult James Cameron and Mary (Marie) Ball from the Indiana Repertory Theater’s production of *The Gospel According to James*. Playwright Charles Smith created a meeting between the two characters as adults to reflect on the “ambivalent nature of memory.”

Photograph by Julie Cerr. Courtesy of the Indiana Repertory Theater.

is being recognized for his life experiences; Marie is in town for her father’s funeral. The older Ball and Cameron spar and recount contrasting interpretations and memories of August 1930, while their younger selves enact the events.

The play successfully evokes Marion’s racial climate, depicting a midwestern town in which the color line was important, yet constantly shifting. African Americans and whites maintained a wary détente as they worked together yet maintained separate lives. In the days and years following the lynching, some in Grant County speculated that the young people at the center of the lynching had been involved in risky business, not only by their alleged holdups and drinking, but also by ignoring the color line. For these observers, interracial

alliances were fated to lead to bad, even horrifying, conclusions. Many in Grant County blamed the lynching not on racism, but on flouting the color line.

Smith has said that he wanted to portray Marion as an ordinary, but tense, place under “a constant threat of the eruption of violence. It’s happening at home. It’s happening in the street.” The play sympathetically explores how the town’s young people created their own world, in which they both ignored and were restrained by the color line as they engaged in larceny, friendship, and romance. When Deeter was shot, however, those relationships were immaterial to Marion’s society. The only explanations that mattered were those that meshed with the tenets of white supremacy.

Mary’s parents, Hoot and Bea, illustrate the complexity of whiteness in Marion. Hoot Ball scathingly dismisses the Ku Klux Klan, to which he had formerly belonged, as an organization of elite opportunists uninterested in working people like himself. Without minimizing the Klan’s racism and anti-Semitism, Smith’s script deftly calls attention to the class tensions that lay beneath the apparent uniformity of the hate group. Hoot’s investment in his racial status extends to the everyday rituals of his life. Each evening when he comes home, he tells Bea that one of his Italian American coworkers gives her his regards: “The Guinea says hello.” The playwright and actors capture the weary banter of a long-married couple and the casual bigotry by which differences between native-born and ethnic whites are asserted in everyday interactions.

When news spreads that Mary Ball has been raped, the town elevates Hoot to heroic status as the father of an innocent white girl. Putting aside his earlier concern that Mary’s sexual promiscuity would bring shame to the family, he tells his disbelieving wife that Claude and Mary were engaged to be married. Hoot later takes a prominent part in the lynching, first by endorsing the murders of Shipp and Smith. The playwright then gives Hoot the role of saving James Cameron’s life by pronouncing his innocence and then helping the young man escape.


This stagecraft solves the problem of how Cameron escaped death, but it also carries the tension between Hoot’s good and bad qualities to the point of confusion. Finally, however, the audience, which has come to see Hoot Ball as a gritty, complex, and somewhat sympathetic character, is forced to acknowledge that the murderers were not monsters, but humans who committed indefensible acts.2

Vivid conversations among Abe, Tommy, and the young James evoke Marion’s wider African American community. The three discuss the difficulty of working alongside whites and share their frustration with small-town life. When Abe discusses his plans to move to Chicago, he reveals not only his youthful idealism but also the racial claustrophobia of life in Marion. In Abe’s vision, the metropolis is a utopia where African Americans have attained a status unimaginable in Marion and where he and Mary can live openly. Smith’s script portrays a 1930s town in which all the African Americans are young men, without guidance from adults who could more realistically illuminate the choices blacks had to make in order to live in a country which so often denied their humanity. The playwright’s artistic choices have a strong internal logic, especially given his focus on the events of August 6 and 7, but viewers are left with an attenuated sense of African American life in Marion.

The play provides a feminist, class-sensitive portrayal of Mary Ball, and illustrates the constrained circumstances facing the young woman. Smith’s character is a working-class woman who has chosen an African American man as her romantic partner. She is acutely aware of the ways in which sexism operates in relationships and of the risks that women run in any extramarital sexual relationship. Yet, as the violence escalates, Mary appears unable to articulate the differences between her experiences and the stories that the crowd believes. The audience is left wondering whether, by remaining silent, Ball has colluded with the town’s portrayal of her as Deeter’s virginal fiancée, and is thus implicated in the lynching.

Smith’s empathetic portrayal of Mary is especially important given the difficulty that historians face in analyzing the role of white women in lynching. Oral histories and press accounts reflect the complex ideas about white women’s sexuality, lynching, and interracial relationships that prevailed at the time. Newspapers and apologists for the lynching

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2Madison, A Lynching in the Heartland, 7-8. Most accounts agree that Hoot Ball was present at the jail on August 7.
marginalized any evidence that complicated their view of Mary as a sexual innocent—in their minds, a sexually experienced woman could not be a rape victim. Because rape of a white woman was a legitimate reason for lynching, evidence of a sexually active Mary would invalidate the community’s rationale for murdering Shipp and Smith. Indeed, many observers—black and white alike—described Ball as a sexually experienced girl who wore Abe Shipp’s jewelry or other personal effects. Some labeled her as a “prostitute” and bitterly claimed that there had been no rape, and thus, by the internal logic of lynching, no reason for Shipp and Smith to have been murdered.3

James Cameron, in the play and as a historical figure, took up the tools of the historian and archivist to ensure that lynching would not be forgotten. He collected primary sources, including newspaper articles and photographs, and eventually housed them in the institution he established with his wife, the America’s Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee. Cameron pursued this activity at a time when few museums acknowledged lynching and when, for much of the public, the crime remained a little-understood aspect of the remote past. Even many professional historians failed to address lynching for much of the twentieth century, despite the activism of other scholars.4

Many people refused to listen to Cameron’s story; talking about the past, they argued, only stirred up racial antagonism. As Cameron’s stature rose, others accused him of self-aggrandizement and criticized the inconsistencies in his story. A Time of Terror presents an eyewitness narrative of events which Cameron could not have seen from inside his cell. Cameron is the only person who claims that hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan circulated among the mob. His insistence that he was saved from lynching by a mysterious voice—which commanded the crowd to release him—further confounds many readers.5

6Carr, Our Town, 35-36, 146-47, 324-26, 339-40, 385-86; Madison, A lynching in the Heartland, 67-89.


8Cameron, A Time of Terror, 74; Carr, Our Town, 136-39; Madison, A lynching in the Heartland, 10. Madison recounts the various individuals whom observers claim saved Cameron’s life.
Smith acknowledges these inconsistencies but concludes that ultimately Cameron was sincere, and that his refusal to be silent was courageous and important: "There's incredible value in the service he [Cameron] provided. It doesn't matter whether or not he told the truth. If he's willing to step forward, he's allowed to tell what story he chooses." Silence gave the false appearance that society had come to terms with lynching; those who wanted Cameron to remain quiet were essentially asking him to accommodate himself to injustice.

Further, as Smith suggests in his script, Cameron was not the only person with inconsistent memories of the past. The vagaries of collective and individual memory about lynching, and the past more generally, are a central theme of the play. Marie finds Cameron's collection of artifacts morbid, yet throughout the play she clings to her own artifact, a ring that she explains as a gift from Abe. When the ring's real provenance is revealed, the playwright does not portray Marie as a liar. Rather, the audience is asked to consider the ambivalent nature of memory and objects. Cameron's attention to material objects reminds us of the importance of artifacts as bearers of memory. Yet Marie reminds the viewer that people can attach unstable memories to seemingly concrete artifacts. At one point, Cameron asks Marie what she remembers; she replies that she remembers being in Chicago with Abe after he was lynched.

*The Gospel According to James* asks the viewer to come to a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of history and memory. At the talkback sessions I attended, many audience members' comments and questions related to their own emotional responses or to formal elements of the play. Some, however, wanted to know what really happened, as if Smith (or the historians on whose work he had built) possessed and had withheld the truth. Perhaps thoughtful consideration of the relationship between history and memory requires more time for reflection than a talkback session permits.

This play is foremost a compelling and provocative drama. It is also an important intervention into Hoosiers' understanding of lynching and allows the audience to make an empathetic, as well as intellectual, connection with the past. Janet Allen, the artistic director of the IRT, hoped that *The Gospel According to James* would spur viewers to greater

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discussion about lynching. "We were trying to leverage a discussion about crimes... I hope people come out willing to say, we ought to talk about these things, we shouldn't hide them." Such discussions are necessary if Hoosiers are to begin the difficult work of recognizing the injustices of the Marion lynching (and other lynchings in Indiana) and take moral responsibility for the past.