

SYNOPSIS OF YORK

“The tale of York serves as a wonderful example of how one enslaved African American made a major contribution to American history. Yet it also serves as a shocking and troubling example of how he was trapped in the cruel and inhumane institution of slavery. A man who tasted the joys of freedom, equality, and even superiority, only to be plunged back into the despair of slavery upon the expedition’s return.

William Clark – the product of a slaveholding society – acted as he had been conditioned to do. Treating his slaves, including York, as inferior beings; trying to do right by them, but never acknowledging that they were on the same level as white men or deserved the same consideration in making decisions that affected their lives and the lives of their loved ones. . .

For his part, York let his feelings and expectations be known and refused to meekly submit to his master’s unfeeling decision to separate him and his wife. He made the best of his situation until he finally was freed, and possibly until his death. So let us remember York for what he accomplished with his life, but also mourn the tragedy of it.”

James J. Holmberg, historian

In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark

CAST

Brady

York, William Clark’s slave

Mary, lover, later wife, of York

Captain Meriwether Lewis

Captain William Clark

Thomas Jefferson

Messenger

Sergeant Charles Floyd, member of the expedition

Sacajawea

Toussant Charbonneau - Sacajawea’s common law husband

Ezekiel Williams, owner of Mary

Sarah Williams, Ezekiel’s wife

Julia Hancock, William Clark’s fiancée, later wife

John Ordway, member of the expedition

Patrick Gass, member of the expedition

George Gibson, member of the expedition

Pierre Cruzatte, member of the expedition

Crow at Rest, Indian chief

White minister

Slave preacher

Juba, black slave

Simon, young slave

Michael Young, overseer

Pacifica, daughter of York and Mary

Chorus - depicting townspeople, the Corps of Discovery, Indians, others

Black chorus - slaves

The action takes place between 1803 and 1845.

Prologue

As the audience enters the theatre, they see on stage a large weatherbeaten travel chest marked “Property U.S. Army.” The chest is covered with Indian pictographs and the crudely carved names and initials of many people.

The narrator, Brady, enters. He is a mountain man who lives in the wilds of the Rockies. The chest belongs to him, but has been passed down from long ago and has a story behind it. Using objects that he finds within this “Possibles Box,” Brady begins to narrate the story of York.

Act One

From every corner of the United States, citizens react to the news of the Louisiana Purchase and the expedition which President Jefferson proposes to send across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Northerners and Southerners argue over property rights. A chorus of slaves prays to God that they not be sent across the “cold black waters” of the Mississippi. A chorus of Indians sings that the land can never be bought. Thomas Jefferson sends Meriwether Lewis on his way and Lewis leaves to join his co-captain in the expedition, William Clark.

At the homestead of Captain William Clark, a young slave girl, Mary, is waiting for her lover York, William Clark’s personal slave. Clark is busy preparing for the expedition’s departure as he awaits the arrival of Captain Lewis. Alone for a moment, York and Mary declare their love for each other and pledge vows of marriage. York promises to marry her as soon as he returns from the expedition. York leaves to prepare a few last items for the trip as Clark enters with Lewis and the men of the expedition. Mary’s master, Ezekiel Williams, is also in the crowd to see Lewis and Clark off. Ezekiel orders Mary to return home immediately. York and Mary never get a chance to say their final goodbye. York is ordered by Clark to board the boat that will take him West.

The Voyage itself is shown through a quick succession of scenes that presents the three year voyage from York’s point of view, and is narrated by Brady.

We first see the expedition just a few months out of St. Louis. The men are celebrating Captain Clark’s 34th birthday, for which York has dutifully cooked a birthday feast of wild fruits and game. At the end of the night, alone with York, Clark imagines their return to the East and decides that he will propose marriage to Julia Hancock. With the subject of marriage in the air, York mentions that he, too, would like to marry. Clark begins an animated discussion about the breeding possibilities for York, as though he were simply livestock. Left alone by the fire, York determines to find a new way of life for himself.

The expedition soon meets a number of Indian tribes. With each new tribe, Captain Lewis recites the same patronizing speech, treating the Indians like children. The Indians are generally unimpressed with the white men, but find York to be a wonder. York’s black skin seems a mark of divine favor to the Indians. Ordered by Clark to perform a song and dance for their Indian guests, York sings a fantasy story about his own childhood. York sings that before he was caught by Master Clark he was a bear in the forest. York’s comic song soon turns into an impassioned challenge against all slave holders. Clark abruptly ends the song, dismisses the Indian guests, and orders the men to bed. As he departs, an Indian chief gives York an eagle feather as a mark of supreme respect.

The only white man on the expedition who consistently shows York respect is Sergeant Charles Floyd. Floyd is suddenly struck ill and collapses. York tries to nurse Floyd back to health and the two men forge a deep bond as each understands that regardless of color all men are brothers. Just as it seems Floyd is recovering from his sickness, he dies. At the burial, Captain Lewis presents York with Floyd’s

military jacket, against the protests of Clark. For the rest of the voyage west York wears this jacket and the eagle feather which come to signify the promise of equality and freedom for York.

Brady's narrative swiftly moves to the first hard winter of the expedition, spent in a Mandan Indian village. A new member joins the expedition, Sacajawea, who was held as a slave by the Mandans and is now the common law wife of a Frenchman. York is struck by the fact that even in this land of natives there are slaves. York and Sacajawea forge a strong friendship and share their dreams of freedom that they expect for themselves after the voyage.

But hardships beset the expedition. The Missouri turns into a series of great waterfalls and dangerous white rapids. While trying to find a way to past these dangerous waters, Clark falls into a flooding ravine. York rushes to rescue his master. In the fury of the storm it is impossible to make out precisely what is happening. But it soon becomes clear that York thinks he saved his master's life, while Clark thinks York simply tried to help out but didn't actually do anything.

This misunderstanding becomes clear a few weeks later when Clark thanks York for helping him and tells York that there will be a reward for this faithful service. York mistakenly thinks that Clark is promising him his freedom at the end of the voyage. And this dream of freedom carries York through the rest of the trip, even over the dangerous Bitterroot Mountains.

Upon reaching the Pacific Ocean the crew rejoices and each member sings of his dreams for the future. Clark can't wait to return to the East. Lewis is unsure that he can ever do anything to surpass this achievement and he is thrown in doubt. Sacajawea sings of a possible future of freedom won through careful strategy. York imagines his impending freedom, unaware that William Clark already has plans once they get home to put his slave back in his place.

Act Two

The expedition is making its triumphal return to St. Louis.. All of the men receive grants of money and land from the government. Captain Clark receives an important government post. York waits for his own reward, commenting on the gifts given to each of the men and imagining what his own will be. York is thunderstruck when he understands that he is to remain a slave under Captain Clark. Worse yet, he may not return to Kentucky and Mary. Instead, York must accompany his master as Clark courts and proposes to Julia Hancock of Fincastle, Virginia. And in order to remember to keep his place, York is forced to take off Floyd's military jacket. He will be dressed from now on as befits a slave. York feels utterly betrayed.

Meanwhile back in Kentucky Mary feels utterly abandoned. Mary's master and his wife try to comfort the slave girl. Although Mary does not hear about it, we discover that Ezekiel and his wife have some plan that involves ownership papers and the slaves.

Off in Virginia, Clark woos Julia Hancock, who accepts Clark's proposal on the condition that he treats his slave York with more tenderness. In order to win Julia, Clark permits York to return to Kentucky and wed Mary. We then see the two weddings simultaneously: Clark and Julia Hancock married in the great plantation house in Virginia, York and Mary wed in a rude slave hut in Kentucky.

York and Mary are together in wedded bliss for only a week before Ezekiel announces that he is moving family and possessions to Nashville. Ezekiel proudly tells Mary that although he sold off most of the other slaves, the family is keeping Mary. She is to depart immediately with her mistress to Nashville. Just as York promises to follow Mary wherever she is sent, Captain Clark arrives with his new bride. He is on his way to St Louis to take up his new post, and has stopped by Ezekiel's to pick up his slave. Mary and York are parted again.

The scene swiftly changes to 1809. York is at a low dive bar in St. Louis drinking copious amounts of whiskey. He is bitter and surly and announces to the other bar patrons that Meriwether Lewis has died. York drunkenly and bitterly tells them all that every good man he has every known is now dead. The other patrons press York to tell them something about Lewis. As York begins his eulogy he is swept away by his bitterness. York tells the bar patrons that he once saved his master from certain death in the midst of a flood. Clark enters the bar at just this moment. He has been searching for his slave throughout the bars in town, and is annoyed and angered that York is making himself into the hero of the expedition. Clark roughly orders York home. York's patience is finally spent. He refuses to obey his master. Clark mistakes York's wild gesture of protest and, thinking that his slave is about to strike him, he brutally strikes York as the slave is held pinned by the bar patrons. Clark angrily declares that he will no longer coddle his slave. Now York will learn what it is to serve a master.

Eight years later, on a plantation somewhere deep in the South, a newly bought slave boy is being shown his slave quarters and is being warned about proper behavior on the plantation. As an illustration of what happens to disobedient slaves the boy, Simon, is shown an old slave who has been kept locked in a box without food or water for days. The tortured slave is released from the box. It is York, older now and hardened. The slaves gather around York who angrily denounces the whites' treatment of black folk. York discovers that the new slave Simon has come from Nashville; in fact, he had been Ezekiel Williams' property. York asks about Mary who, Simon says, is married and has a child. York is devastated until he realizes that Mary's child is his own daughter, whom Mary named Pacifica in remembrance of her father's heroic journey. John O'Fallon, William Clark's nephew, enters with the news that after years of pleading with her husband Julia has managed to get Clark to allow York to return to St. Louis and live with the family. York departs for "home."

Four years later, Julia is dangerously pregnant with the child whose birth will, in fact, kill her in three months. Julia does not wish to meet her Maker with the sins of York upon her soul. She has convinced Clark to grant York his freedom. The two tell York this news and present him with a sum of money which they saved from the profits that York's labors have earned them over the past four years. With this money, Julia says, York can buy the freedom of Mary. Julia also presents York with Floyd's jacket. Clark can not bring himself to be civil to his servant. So York leaves Clark without the two men ever really reconciling.

York arrives at Mary's slave quarters shouting for his wife. Pacifica, now a fifteen year old girl, hushes York, telling him that her mother is ill. York tells his daughter who he is and during this tearful union Mary enters, older and visibly ill. York announces that he has come to purchase her freedom. "I am no slave." Mary declares, then dies.

York vows that his daughter Pacifica will never live through the evils her mother and father have known. He will take her to a land of freedom, far out West.

Epilogue

Brady is back just as in the beginning of the play. He explains that York did find freedom out West, and came to live with a tribe of Crow Indians, as a respected and honored elder. The "Possibles box" was carried out west by York, and given to his daughter Pacifica when York died. Pacifica gave the box to her son, who is Brady. Brady tells us that he lives in freedom now, just as his grandfather York had wanted for his children. And at night he can still hear the ghosts of all the characters of his story searching for the meaning of their lives.

We see the ghosts of the expedition members and of the Indians and of the slaves. They ask the audience whether America has found a better way to live than the one they knew.

York is reunited with Mary. And as the entire company of spirits sings "Preserve your Freedom. Cherish Love!" the ghost of William Clark and the Spirit of York the Freedman finally reconcile.