

Cato in Tennessee

Perspectives on a Theatrical Experiment

Misty G. Anderson, Shinnervie Jackson, and David Francis Taylor



Joseph Addison's *Cato* is a play that is in the US-American bloodstream. First performed in London in 1713, the verse tragedy was part of the political consciousness—and political unconscious—of the architects of the American Revolution, who turned repeatedly to its speeches of liberty, replete with the sacrifices warranted in liberty's service, as readymade soundbites for their case. The staging of the play by Washington's troops, and indeed before their commander in chief, at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in 1778, consecrated *Cato* as the American play *avant la lettre*. But what, if anything, does this 300-year-old tragedy have to say to audiences in the present-day US—and audiences in the South, more specifically? This question is a theatrical one, for Addison's densely oratorical tragedy has long been regarded as unsuited for performance, as a bad play if good (or at least eminently quotable) poetry. But the question is also, perforce, a political one: because the play has a history, since its first performance, of enflaming partisan divisions; because its calibrations of race—of Africa as the other of Rome, of the African becoming the Roman—are as intricate as they are troubling; and because to stage *Cato* might involve an archaeology of dramatic form and character but not of ideas. The Enlightenment liberalism that undergirds Addison's play is the very stuff that American politics is made of.

In September 2023, *Cato* was revived at the Clarence Brown Theatre at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in a production directed by Charles Pasternak, produced by Misty G. Anderson and the R/18 Collective, and funded by the Institute of American Civics. Running for a week, each performance was followed by a talkback that actively engaged audiences in the questions of partisanship, citizenship, freedom, and race with which the play wrestles. Reflecting critically on the underlying histories, risks, stakes, and insights of this experiment, our thoughts are borne out of a deep and extended dialog on the process and experience of mounting *Cato* in 21st-century Tennessee. They are shaped by the conversations we shared. But each of us comes at the project from a different angle: as an editor of Addison's plays (Taylor), as a scholar and producer of 18th-century theatre (Anderson), and as an actor and acting professor (Jackson). The tripartite structure of this article preserves the particularity of our perspectives and experiences in this same order.

Figure 1: (facing page) Louis du Guernier's engraving of the death of Cato at the close of Addison's play, used as a frontispiece to the seventh edition of Cato in 1713. (Collection of David Francis Taylor)

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I. A Brief History of Risk

Cato, from Britain to America

(by David Francis Taylor)

We don't talk enough about the history of theatre as a history of risk. To perform Addison's *Cato* in America in 2023 was certainly to take a risk—because of the issues of political liberty and race that the play raises and, equally, because it has long been considered virtually unstageable. But then risks of various kinds are part of the story of *Cato* almost from the beginning. Addison apparently conceived of a tragedy dramatizing the death of Cato the Younger (85–46 BCE)—famous stoic and uncompromising opponent of Julius Caesar—in the 1690s, while he was at Magdalen College, Oxford (Addison 1721:1.xiii–xiv). Numerous sources confirm that he had drafted four acts of the play by 1703, towards the end of a long tour of Europe. At this stage, Addison's publisher Jacob Tonson saw it; so too did Addison's friend and future collaborator Richard Steele, the actor and the theatre manager Colley Cibber, and also Jonathan Swift (Spence 1966:1:332; Cibber [1740] 1968:249; Swift [1710–13] 2013:521–22). But the play would have to wait until the winter of 1712/13 for its fifth and final act, during which time the existence of the unfinished *Cato* seems to have been something of an open secret, with one Oxford student urging Addison to “no more detain / The free-born Cato, struggling in his chains” (Prevost 1733:112).

Why did it take Addison a decade to complete the play? He was, to be sure, a busy man, as both his literary and political careers took off: in 1705 he took a key position in government as an undersecretary of state, in 1707 he was elected to parliament, and in 1708 he became secretary to the lord lieutenant of Ireland. Such activities cannot, though, entirely explain leaving aside *Cato* as he had time to write another play—the opera, *Rosamond*—from scratch in 1705/06. Yet this experience would hardly have encouraged him as a playwright; though its premiere at Drury Lane in February 1707 was greeted with great anticipation, the opera disappeared from the stage after just three performances.¹ If he didn't already know it, *Rosamond* would have taught Addison just how much risk—of the most public and embarrassing kind of failure—attends the life of a writer for the commercial stage. Having achieved literary celebrity with his poem *The Campaign* (1704) and his *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) (see Smithers 1968:91–146), Addison returned to the seemingly more secure, or at least less exposed, domain of print, most notably with *The Spectator*, the wildly successful periodical he created in 1711 with Steele.

There is, however, another likely reason why *Cato* remained unfinished for so long—and here, too, the matter is one of risk. The prospect of the final act confronted Addison with the challenge of how to negotiate and stage the suicide of his protagonist in an appropriate way and without seeming to endorse such a practice. Cato, having retreated to the city of Utica in North Africa following the defeat of the republican army at the Battle of Thapsus (46 BCE), took his own life rather than face capture by Julius Caesar. The chief source for information about this suicide is Plutarch, who records that Cato first struck an understandably suspicious servant for refusing to return his weapon, which friends had hidden; then, having injured his sword hand in that act, Cato botched his own stabbing and so finally and desperately resorted to tearing out his entrails with his bare hands (Plutarch 1919:400–07). On his European travels, Addison saw Carlo Francesco Pollarolo and Matteo Noris's opera *Cato Uticense* at Venice, which had followed Plutarch's account with lurid fidelity (Addison [1705] 1914:2:59). But such violent and bloody spectacle lent itself neither to Addison's conception of Cato's character nor to his austere model of tragic theatre. In the *Spectator*, he denounced the English stage's predilection for “dreadful butchering” as “absurd and barbarous,” arguing: “To delight in seeing Men stabb'd, poyson'd, rack'd, or impaled, is certainly the Sign of a cruel Temper” (Addison [1711–12] 1965:1:187–88).

1. The blame for *Rosamond*'s failure has usually been laid at the feet of its composer, Thomas Clayton. *A Critical Discourse* attacked the opera's score as “abominable” and “the worst Musick in the World” (Lewis 1709:67–68, 69).

When at last Addison wrote the final act of *Cato*, he considerably tempered the scene of classical suicide. Cato's self-wounding occurs offstage; then, in a markedly sedate spectacle, the protagonist is "brought forward in his chair" and delivers a final speech of anachronistically Christian import in which he expresses regret for his suicide and hope for providential mercy: "methinks a beam of light breaks in / On my departing soul. Alas! I fear / I've been too hasty" ([1713] 2004:5.4.79, 95–96; fig. 1). Yet amid widespread fears that England was in the grip of a suicide epidemic (see Minois 1999:181–85), Addison's attempts to ensure that his play could not be construed as valorizing suicide did not stop some readers from finding fault. John Dennis, in his highly critical *Remarks upon Cato*, argued that the spectacle of "a Man of accomplish'd Virtue driven to lay violent Hands upon himself, only for supporting Liberty" offered "pernicious instruction" to "People in a free Country, or to an Island so notorious as ours for the frequency of self Murder" (Dennis [1713] 1939:2:45). Likewise, one newspaper condemned the play for "setting Self-Murther" in a "dazzling light" (*Free-Thinker* [1718] 1722:38). Such fears seemed to be realized in 1737, when the writer Eustace Budgell—in fact, Addison's cousin—died by suicide and apparently left an unfinished couplet to vindicate the act: "What Cato did and Addison approved / Cannot be wrong" (in Johnson [1779–81] 2006:5:14). These lines were not readily forgotten. As late as 1790, Charles Moore's *A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide*—which actually jumped to *Cato*'s defense—observed in alarm that Budgell's "mischievous" interpretation of the play had "been caught up by many suicides [...] to justify his own murder" (1790:2:114, 116).

Ultimately, it seems to have been the forceful entreaties of friends, as well as the prospect of another writer (John Hughes) penning the final act, that prompted Addison to complete the play. That these entreaties were partly if not largely driven by political considerations is clear. In 1713, the Tory party—rivals to Whigs, supported by Addison and his coterie—were in government and, with Queen Anne ailing, fears were growing that the Jacobite supporters of the House of Stuart would, upon Anne's death, seek to disrupt the planned Hanoverian succession and install the Catholic James Francis Edward Stuart, son of the deposed James II, on the throne. At stake, as far as the Whigs were concerned, was the continuance of a Protestant, parliamentary regime secured by the Revolution Settlement of 1689. It is in light of this febrile political atmosphere that Hughes felt that *Cato* "would be of Service to the Publick, to have it represented at the latter End of Queen Ann's Reign, when the old *English* Spirit of Liberty was as likely to be lost as it had ever been since the Conquest" (Oldmixon 1728:6). Cibber—comanager of Drury Lane, which mounted *Cato* in 1713 with Cibber in the role of Syphax—recalled: "the Friends of Mr. Addison, then thought it a proper time to animate the Publick with the Sentiments of *Cato*" ([1740] 1968:267). And Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who read the play in manuscript, advised him to "have some stronger Lines on Liberty scatter'd through the Play [...] I beleive [*sic*] it would have a very good Effect on the Minds of the People" (Montagu [1713] 1977:66–67). Addison evidently heeded this suggestion, for the word "liberty" appears some 14 times in the play. In the minds of those who urged Addison to put *Cato* on the public stage, there was no doubt that it was an urgently political drama.

Addison, though, was anxious that his play not be regarded as a party piece and he went out of his way to forestall the partisan appropriation. He evenhandedly tasked Alexander Pope—"a Tory and even a Papist," as George Berkeley put it ([1713] 2013:87)—with the prolog and had Whig wit and poet Sir Samuel Garth write the epilog. He also asked Pope to show it to Lords Bolingbroke and Oxford, two leaders of the Tory ministry, "and to assure them that he never in the least designed it as a party-play" (in Spence 1966:1:62). When he dined with Bolingbroke just 11 days before the play premiered—at Drury Lane on 14 April 1713—*Cato* must surely have been among the topics discussed (see Swift [1710–13] 2013:523).

Indeed, the play itself openly warns its audience of the perils of inflammatory rhetoric and political factionalism, with its closing admonition—"From hence, let fierce contending nations know, / What dire effects from civil discord flow" (5.4.107–08)—and Addison recapitulated his censure of partisan politics in *The Spectator*: "A furious Party Spirit, when it rages in its full Violence, exerts it self in Civil War and Bloodshed; and when it is under its greatest Restraints naturally breaks out in Falshood [*sic*], Detraction, Calumny, and a partial Administration of Justice" ([1711–12] 1965:1:510).

So concerned was Addison not to exacerbate party tensions or incite political violence—again, the matter is one of risk—that he even asked Pope to revise a key phrase in *Cato*'s prolog, which had originally called upon Britons to “arise.” Addison, “frighten'd at so *daring an expression*, which, he thought, squinted at rebellion,” as William Warburton later put it, had Pope alter the verb to the restrained “attend” (1751:1:271).

Yet all such precautions proved in vain. In such politically polarized circumstances, a play about the fall of the Roman Republic from the pen of arguably the most prominent of all Whig writers was always going to become a source of partisan contestation. It was exactly this politics that guaranteed *Cato*'s electrifying success in 1713. As Pope recounts of the play's premiere: “The numerous and violent claps of the Whig party on the one side the theatre, were echoed back by the Tories on the other, while the author sweated behind the scenes with concern to find their applause proceeded more [from] the hand than the head” ([1713] 1956:1:175). One enterprising publisher rushed out a political “key” to the tragedy, while Whig and Tory newspapers quarreled over how to read it. Was *Cato*, as the Whig media would have it, a cipher for John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, whose troops had defeated the French at the Battle of Blenheim in 1704, thereby thwarting the absolutist Louis XIV's attempts at European domination? Or, as the Tory media countered, was Marlborough, who had sought to have his post as captain-general elevated to a life appointment, rather to be found in the character of Caesar, the commander-turned-emperor (who never appears in Addison's play and yet is a constant, shadowy presence)? Tory efforts to appropriate the play were most notably enacted by Bolingbroke himself, who, as Pope records, “sent for [Barton] Booth who played *Cato* [...] and presented him with 50 guineas; in acknowledgement (as he expressed it) for his defending the cause of liberty so well against a *perpetuall* [*sic*] *dictator*” (read: Marlborough; [1713] 1956:1:175).

Addison's fears were thus vividly realized and he was to remain conspicuously silent about his play and its political resonance—silent, that is, until Queen Anne finally died. At that point, angling for preferment in the new Hanoverian regime, Addison presented a copy of his play to the Princess of Wales, along with a new poem addressed to her in which he praised the new King George I as a figure in whom the nation saw “*Caesar*'s power with *Cato*'s virtue join'd” ([1716] 1914:1:332). What Addison could not possibly have seen, though, is how vital his political drama was to become to American political culture decades after his death, as the scholarship of Fredric M. Litto (1966) and Jason Shaffer (2003) has brilliantly shown. From 1771 to 1775, for instance, the masthead for the *Massachusetts Spy* featured *Cato*'s address to liberty in act 3: “Do thou, great liberty, inspire our souls, / And make our lives in thy possession happy, / Or our deaths glorious in thy just defence” (Addison [1713] 2004:3.5.79–81; see Litto 1966:446). Likewise, references to *Cato* are commonplace in the writings of key figures in the revolutionary period, including John Adams, Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Gouverneur Morris, John Jay, Henry Lee Jr., John Hancock, and Charles Thomson. George Washington, meanwhile, cited *Cato* repeatedly. In a letter to Sally Fairfax of 1758, for instance, he flirtatiously imagined himself “being the Juba to such a Marcia as you must make” (Juba, an African prince, is the protégé of *Cato* and is in love with his daughter, Marcia; Washington [1758] 1988:42); while in 1775 Washington assured Benedict Arnold that “It is not in the power of any man to command success, but you have done more” (1987:493), misquoting lines (Addison [1713] 2004:1.2.44–45) that Arnold would himself paraphrase in 1779 in an early, coded letter to British agent Major John André (Commager and Morris 1958:2:748). Most famously, Addison's play provided the source for the final words of American soldier and spy Nathan Hale, who, moments before being executed by the British army in September 1776, is reported to have exclaimed: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country” (rephrasing 4.4.81–82: “what pity is it / That we can die but once to serve our country!”) (Seymour 1941:310). Such was *Cato*'s remarkable currency during the revolution and in the early years of the new republic.

Why, though, did a decades-old tragedy by an Englishman become a play—perhaps *the* play—of the American Revolution? In part, its appeal lay in its particular combination of politics and classical subject matter. As Bernard Bailyn has shown, the rebelling colonists were especially drawn to classical ideals and rhetoric, in which the struggle between “provincial virtues” and the tyranny

and corruption at “the center of power” is a recurrent trope ([1967] 1992:26). In this context, they readily fostered analogies between themselves and Roman figures such as Brutus, Cassius, Cicero, and Cato (while Britain was characterized as Caesar). Cato the Younger had a special place in American political discourse and thought thanks to the popularity of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s hugely influential “Cato’s Letters” (1720–23)—libertarian essays that were written under the pseudonym “Cato.” Addison’s tragedy thus both benefitted and further catalyzed what Bailyn describes as the rise of “what might be called a ‘Catoic’ image, central to the political theory of the time” ([1967] 1992:44).

Yet the play’s extraordinary embeddedness within revolutionary thought was also a consequence of its peculiar dramaturgy. As Shaffer observes, Addison’s crafting of nonpartisan theatre means that the confrontation between liberty and despotism that Cato stages, along with its endorsement of civic duty and virtue over private or familial interest, possess a special (and strategic) abstractness (2003:9–10). It is thus a play that readily lent itself to appropriation by and within very different political contexts from that in which it was first performed—all the more so as an ornately oratorical tragedy that is eminently quotable. For Shaffer, to understand the appeal of Cato to the American “worldview,” we need to think in terms not of Bailyn’s Catoic “image” but instead of a Catoic “effigy” (2003:10), the term that Joseph Roach uses to define how performing bodies “provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates” (1996:36). In fact, Richard Steele, Addison’s friend and collaborator, saw in *Cato* the most complete realization of his model of an emulative drama that attained civic and moral efficacy by encouraging spectators to imitate the exemplary characters they witnessed onstage (see Taylor 2022:64–68). As Pope’s prolog instructed the play’s first audiences, they should “Live o’er each scene, and be what they behold” (in Addison [1713] 2004:21). That this prolog was originally spoken by Juba, who is Cato’s chief acolyte, reaffirms the play’s emulative logic, whereby the non-Roman desperate to fashion himself as a Catoic Roman serves as a proxy for us, the audience, who must likewise aspire to such exemplary patriotic conduct and sacrifice. As a drama of liberty against tyranny that actively urges its audience to remake their civic selves in the image of the fleshed-out classical effigies they see onstage, *Cato* spoke to the political ideals and ambitions of revolutionary America in the most profound and intoxicating of ways.

Unsurprisingly, then, it is in performance that *Cato*’s transformation into an American play is most vividly seen. An epilog spoken at a performance of the play at the Bow Street Theatre, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1778, openly compared Roman opposition to Caesar with American opposition to the British and Cato with Washington. The epilog also notes—alert to the perils of equating the American cause with the fall of the Roman Republic—that “No pent-up Utica contracts your pow’rs, / But the whole boundless continent is yours!” (Sewall [1778] 1890:6; the first line here reworks 1.1.39). That this epilog was included, as Shaffer notes, in editions of the play published at Portsmouth (1778), Providence, Rhode Island (1779), Worcester, Massachusetts (1782), and Boston (1793) demonstrates just how important Addison’s *Cato* was to the construction of American identity and the mythologization of the Revolution during and after it (2003:21).

It is above all the staging of *Cato* by Washington’s troops at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in May 1778 that occupies a key place in this mythology. William Bradford Jr., a young lieutenant colonel in the Continental Army, wrote to his sister that “Cato was performed before a very numerous & splendid audience,” Washington included, and that the “scenery was in Taste—& the performance admirable” (in Bryan 2010:124–25). “For the ragged soldiers in Washington’s camp,” writes Randall Fuller, “Addison’s tragedy offered a salient version of national destiny characterized by self-sacrifice, republican virtue, and an almost boundless devotion to the principles of liberty” (1999:128). Some 65 years after its premiere, the history of *Cato* still presented a risk. Not least, Washington’s troops were contravening the 1774 Congressional ban on performance (theatre, deemed a British import, was included in the prohibition of trade in all British commodities). But, perhaps the more immediate risk for those involved was that officers of the Continental Army might be perceived to be behaving rather too like the enemy (the British army regularly engaged in theatricals, including at nearby Philadelphia in the winter of 1777/78). Mark Evans Bryan’s revisionist account (2010) of

the Valley Forge *Cato* has shown not only that the performance took place in a “bakehouse” that would have held a limited number of spectators, likely comprised of the camp’s elite, but that it was not presented at Washington’s direct behest. Bryan also posits that the staging deepened anxieties—including in the Continental Congress—that the officers at Valley Forge were adopting the prodigal habits of their British counterparts.

By this point in the 18th century, however, the British themselves had largely lost interest in Addison’s tragedy as a performable play, at least beyond the all-male schoolroom, where amateur stagings continued to be popular. The consensus in Britain by then, shared by critics and audiences, was that *Cato* was best appreciated on the page. It was performed just 28 times in London in the second half of the 18th century, though the actor and manager John Philip Kemble did successfully revive the tragedy in 1811. Samuel Johnson considered it “rather a poem in dialog than a drama” ([1779–81] 2006:3:76), while the writer Francis Gentleman judged: “It should be immortal in the closet, but cannot justly claim possession of the stage” (1770:1:459). Poet Edward Young, who jumped to lavish praise upon *Cato* in 1713, later damningly asserted that in the play “that which is most dramatic in drama, dies” (1759:88).² There had, in fact, been those who held this opinion even before the play found its way onto the Drury Lane stage, and it is possible that Addison—whose ambivalence towards the material bases, what he calls the “Show and Outside” of theatrical performance, is evident in many of his *Spectator* essays—initially conceived of *Cato* as a closet play ([1711–12] 1965:1:180).³

Cato, one might argue, is accidental theatre. It takes a singularly unpromising historical figure—a famous stoic—as its tragic hero and it locates itself at a point in the timeline of the Roman Republic’s fall when both the final battle and the cause have been lost, with the possibilities for dramatic action limited in the extreme. As the senator Lucius concedes in the play’s second act: “what men could do / Is done already” (2.1.75–76). In many ways, Addison’s tragedy, a tragedy in which nothing much happens or can happen, might be more appropriately called “Waiting for Caesar.”

However, this play did, in all its strangeness, succeed to a sensational extent on the London stage in 1713 and then again on the stages of early America in the later 18th century. More specifically, it succeeded as a drama that spoke to and animated audiences living through moments of acute political crisis when the very concept of “liberty”—that word to which Addison’s play returns again and again, always flickering between nebulous abstraction and the promise of something necessary and realizable—was being violently contested and defined. On these terms, the experiment of staging *Cato* in present-day America—where “liberty” is being fought over by the political left and right in the most internecine ways—might well be seen as a risk worth taking, artistically and politically.

II. *Cato* in Tennessee

(by Misty G. Anderson)

Cato was a political Rorschach test when it premiered in April 1713, and it proved to be one again in September of 2023. The original pitch in February of 2023 to the funder, the Institute of American Civics, was to stage *Cato* professionally in order to give a community audience the chance to see the play that had been staged at Valley Forge in 1778. The Institute had just been formed in May 2022 by the Tennessee legislature, in a bipartisan vote of 120–6 (three Republicans and three Democrats dissenting), to “model civil discourse and purposeful pluralism” (IAC n.d.). The first sentence of the institute’s website hopefully declares that “In a time of proliferating distrust and political polarization, the Institute of American Civics presents a remarkable opportunity to address these challenges” (IAC n.d.). At the time they funded *Cato* at \$41,915 (a figure that does not include the generous in-kind support of the Clarence Brown Theatre), the institute’s board, leadership, and precise mission had not been defined, though the epigraph that opened the white

2. Young had earlier written a poem celebrating the play, which appeared in its 8th edition in 1713.

3. John Oldmixon (1728:6) claims that Arthur Maynwaring, like Addison a member of the Kit-Cat Club, was “against bringing the Play upon the Stage.”

paper about the institute's purpose warned: "In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators" (Wannamaker et al. 2022). It is remarkable, then, that the IAC's first public event would be the staging of *Cato* to celebrate Constitution Day. In addition to the generous IAC funding, the feat was made possible by Charles Pasternak, artistic director of the Santa Cruz Shakespeare Festival. His deft direction found not just a playable but a compelling 21st-century *Cato* that could pose its own questions about its place in American history. The project was supported dramaturgically by the R/18 Collective; the in-kind gifts of space, costumes, and staff from the Clarence Brown Theatre and its artistic director Ken Martin; and additional speakers fund resources from the John C. Hodges Fund of the Department of English at the University of Tennessee.

The production explored the-
 ses advanced by Ginger Strand and Daniel O'Quinn, particularly, that the early US nation mediated its self-conception through the-
 atre by regarding the audience as an active and participatory republican project (Strand 1999:19; O'Quinn 2022:24). Audiences participate, query, and vote through applause, nervous laughter, and ultimately, with their feet. Pasternak's direction seized on this insight from the 1713 production: that *Cato's* main action is, in fact, the affective interplay of actor and audience. This production furthered that process by directly asking each audience to stay for 30 minutes and discuss the play. Night after night, multigenerational audiences explored the tensions that the play surfaces between liberty and slavery, tensions that unfold between the promise of an American principle of equality and the realities of empire and race that steer the nation's formation. These tensions activated both progressive and conservative frames of memory as well as memory's formative relation to possible futures.

Our sense of *Cato's* timeliness included the concern, parallel to Addison's, that the play could be exploited to partisan ends in yet another politically febrile moment. By the time the Knoxville production opened at the Clarence Brown's Lab Theatre, the 2024 presidential campaign was underway; Trump's civil fraud trial in New York was on the immediate horizon; criminal indictments against him had been filed in the hush money, federal election, and classified documents

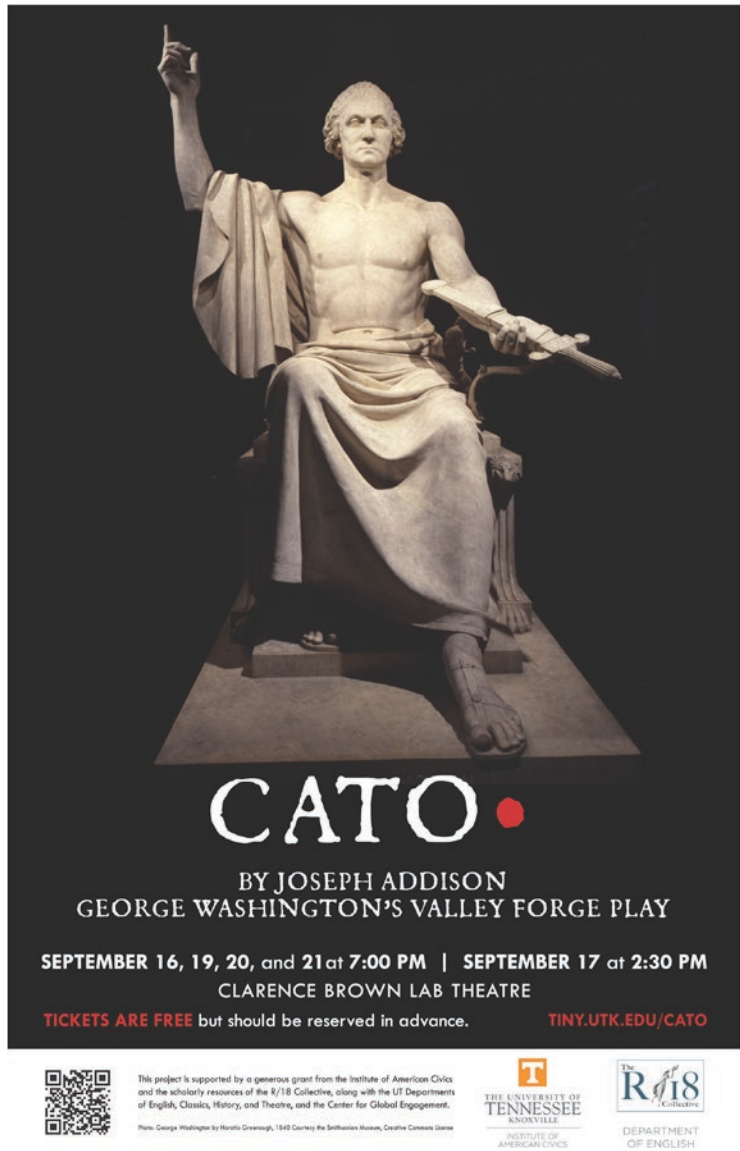


Figure 2. *Cato* poster, Clarence Brown Lab Theatre, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2023. (Poster design by Julie Summers)

cases; “Red Caesarism” was about to break as international news; and social media was awash with reports of men who were, evidently, thinking about the Roman Empire every day (Wilson 2023; El Aassar 2023). The political associations with “Cato,” built up through the use of the name on the mastheads of prorevolutionary colonial American newspapers; the early libertarian *Cato’s Letters*; the 20th-century think tank, The Cato Institute; and the association of George Washington with Cato had the potential to shade into a more recent “forefather mania,” on display in the January 6th insurrection, in which online merchandise brandishing 1776, “We the People,” and the word “liberty” circulate, like *Cato’s* pull quotes, as emotionally charged soundbites. Wendy Brown calls such objects and ideas “affective remains” in the ruins of neoliberalism, a past in pieces, cathected onto instrumentalized affective investments in the present (2019:187).

The show both participated in and disrupted these expectations by featuring Horatio Greenough’s provocative 1841 bare-chested, toga-wearing, sandaled Washington on its poster (fig. 2). Greenough’s sculpture was based on the now-lost statue *Olympian Zeus*, but it is inspired by the myth of Washington as the “American Cato,” which was still current in the 19th century. The sculpture originally scandalized onlookers when it was placed in the Capitol rotunda, so it was moved outdoors, where it faced the Lincoln Memorial during its construction. Then, in 1908, it was moved into the Smithsonian and, eventually, relocated to the National Museum of American History, where it resides now (Rand 2020:xi). The statue’s peripatetic path is a reminder that, as Kirk Savage observes, neither monuments nor their meanings hold still (2009:22). We live in an age of relocating, relabeling, removing, or destroying statues praising slavers; of rethinking American origin stories through works like *Hamilton* and the 1619 Project; and of battles over how American history is taught (Goldstein 2020; Green 2023).

In addition to the ideological risks embedded in *Cato’s* legacies, the Knoxville production also had to thread the needle of the full Clarence Brown Theatre regular season, the IAC’s timeline, and the limited availability of our actors, several of whom were flying to Knoxville between their summer Shakespeare seasons and the start of fall rehearsals. The cast list included:

- Cato, Roman senator and governor of Utica—Jonno Eiland
- Lucius, a senator—Nancy Duckles
- Sempronius, a senator and enemy of Cato—Charlotte Munson
- Juba, Prince of Numidia—Ithamar Francois
- Syphax, General of the Numidian army—Shinnerrie Jackson
- Portius, Cato’s son—Jordan Gatton-Bumpus
- Marcus, Cato’s son—Garrett Wright
- Decius, Ambassador from Caesar—Angelique Archer
- Marcia, Cato’s daughter—Raine Palmer
- Lucia, Lucius’s daughter—Angelique Archer

This cast of nine met for the first time on 4 September 2023, and, after a brutally compressed rehearsal period, *Cato* opened on 15 September 2023 for a week-long run that sold out after the first show. A safety copy of the script, dressed up as a leather-bound folio edition of *Cato*, was passed from actor to actor as they took turns serving as prompter.

Pasternak’s casting decisions foregrounded the racial and gendered lines of power. The cast, with 55% white and 45% BIPOC-identified actors, embodied the ethnic multiplicity of early and postrevolutionary America, which is written into plays like Aphra Behn’s *The Widow Ranter* (1689), a dramatization of Bacon’s Rebellion; and Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787), which satirizes Americans who follow British fashions by mocking their extreme whiteness—as well as the demographics of contemporary US American society. Eiland, a Vietnamese American actor, played Cato, and four women played the military leaders: Munson (Sempronius), Duckles (Lucius), Archer (Decius), and Jackson (Syphax) (see fig. 3). Munson and Jackson delivered some of the most sexually violent, dis-



Figure 3: From left: Charlotte Munson as Sempronius, Raine Palmer (background) as Marcia, and Shinnerrie Jackson as Syphax in *Cato* by Joseph Addison, directed by Charles Pasternak. Clarence Brown Lab Theatre, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2023. (Photo by Taryn Farro)

turbing lines of the play in performances that asked the audience to confront the space between their embodied gender presentation and the sexual or political violence Addison's play describes.

The show's design attempted to take the fragments of *Cato* that audiences might have brought to the theatre, including Nathan Hale's apocryphal last words ("I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country"), Patrick Henry's generous closing quotation from *Cato* in his 1775 speech ("give me liberty or give me death"), and Valley Forge mythologies, and make them intelligible in the present. Pasternak approached the mythology of the Valley Forge *Cato* by using a simple play-within-the-play strategy that avoided nostalgia or 18th-century costume drama. Kaelyn Williams's designs were grounded in the narrative of resistance and failure within *Cato* and won the 2024 Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) Graduate Costume design award. Her base costume for each character, dubbed "protester costumes," used contemporary street clothes to translate the affective touch points between battlefield, resistance, protest, historical change, and race as each actor then took on their *Cato* character onstage, pulling their *Cato* costume out of a trunk to move from the present to a past that felt like a foreign country (fig. 4). These costumes, inspired by science fiction and Afrofuturist films like *Black Panther* (2018), created a visual palette that suggested both an ambiguous past and a dystopian, militarized future. Williams was able to execute her plan in this compressed time frame and integrate it into a bare set: two low platforms, a few chairs, a trunk, and a muslin screen. The lighting design by Kayla Moore had to make use of the rigging for an upcoming production; her creative solutions went on to win the SETC's Undergraduate Lighting Design award. A temporary screen, held by Numidian general Syphax (Jackson) and Roman senator Lucius (Duckles) in the opening sequence, displayed five slides with the framing historical information about the Roman colonial North African setting in Numidia, a plot sketch, and information about *Cato*'s significance in colonial America, including the Valley Forge production, at the top of the show. The design thoughtfully moved the audience from the frame story in the present, through the Valley Forge associations, to a temporally uncertain space in which the story unfolded.



Figure 4: From left: Ithamar Francois, Jonno Eiland, Charlotte Munson, Jordan Gatton-Bumpus, Nancy Duckles, and Raine Palmer in *Cato*, by Joseph Addison, directed by Charles Pasternak. Clarence Brown Lab Theatre, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2023. (Photo by Taryn Farro)

Music created ludic entry and exit points that softened and thinned the space between past and present. The show began with Vermont’s revolutionary anthem “The Green Mountaineer” (1779) sung by Munson, a Vermonter herself, and played on guitar by Eiland. Actors joined in the chorus as they entered in their base costumes. The opening folk ballad rollicked along with martial optimism that dissipated with the first exchange between Marcus and Portius, in a state of despair as Caesar approached. Other sound queues peppered the spare production to productively blend past and present. A quick military drum cadence introduced *Cato*. But soon, helicopter blades were whirring as Syphax described the rising storm of a desert war, with echoes of the London blitz, of the Iraq war, and of Ukraine. Finally, two mournful verses of the mid-19th-century hymn “Abide with Me,” sung by Munson, closed the show as she and the cast placed their costumes back in the trunk, shedding their roles before the audience and providing a bridge into the community conversation that followed each performance.

The editorial task behind this adaptation was, first of all, to wrest a compelling cut of *Cato* out of Addison’s text, which, as Dennis, Johnson, Gentleman, and Young had all argued, needed editing (Taylor makes this case above). *Cato* presents a host of dramaturgical problems as a play of speeches built around the titular character who is remarkably static; characters enter and exit without clear motive to make ineffective rhetorical arguments that change no minds. Pasternak summarized the problems neatly during an early production meeting: “what the hell are these people doing?” The severely cut *Cato* we presented (with 10,992 of the 17,258 words in the first edition of 1713) used David F. Taylor’s edition as its basis. After paring the Ciceronian tricolons down to the story’s throughline, it played in one hour and 18 minutes. The cut had to make visible a buried storyline that would have been immediately familiar to 18th-century audiences but not to 21st-century viewers: that the old Roman senate is about to fall to Caesar as his army marches through the Roman colonial outposts of North Africa on their way to Utica. The cut refashioned monologs into dialog to help audiences follow the character relationships that form the story. Addison’s rhetorical elaborations—conventional in heroic tragedy and above all a symptom of

his adherence to a Senecan model of tragedy—traffic in more similes than an audience could reasonably follow. The cut foregrounded the contest of characters as they embodied debates over political goods and the vulnerability of democracy to the power of persuasion. Portius’s scene-setting opening speech, for example, was pruned back to plot essentials that could still give the audience that sense of dread at the approach of Caesar’s army through his sense of urgency and outrage deprived of action:

PORTIUS: The Dawn is over-cast, the Morning low’rs,
 And heavily in Clouds brings on the Day,
 The Great, th’ important Day, big with the Fate
 Of Cato and of Rome.—Our Father’s Death
 Would fill up all the Guilt of Civil War,
 And close the Scene of Blood:
 Already Caesar Has ravaged more than half the globe, and sees
 Mankind grown thin by his destructive Sword:
 Should he go further, Numbers would be wanting
 To form new Battels, and support his Crimes:
 Ye Gods, what Havock does Ambition make
 Among your Works! (1.1.1–11)

Our Portius (Gatton-Bumpus) opened with a restrained sense of grief and gravity that distinguished him from his fiery brother Marcus (Wright), who was charged with thunderously performing the rhetorical excess that spells his doom as clearly as Portius’s cut lines above predict Cato’s death:

MARCUS: Thy stedly Temper, *Portius*,
 Can look on Guilt, Rebellion, Fraud, and *Caesar*,
 In the calm Lights of mild Philosophy;
 I’m tortured, ev’n to Madness, when I think
 On the proud Victor: ev’ry time he’s named—
~~*Pharsalia* rises to my View I see~~
 Th’ Insulting Tyrant prancing o’er the Field
 Strow’d with *Rome’s* Citizens, and drench’d in Slaughter,
 His Horse’s Hoofs wet with Patrician Blood.
~~Oh *Portius*, is there not some chosen Curse,
 Some hidden Thunder in the Stores of Heav’n,
 Red with uncommon Wrath, to blast the Man
 Who owes his Greatness to his Country’s Ruin?~~ (1.1.12–24)

Marcus’s elaborations preserved the force of his rhetorical rage and signaled to contemporary audiences, who could not be expected to have any familiarity with Pliny’s account of Cato the Younger or of Addison’s play, that Marcus is an angry young man ripe for a battlefield suicide mission, a prelude to Cato’s more stately death.

When editing the script, we also had to address the greatest risk inherent to any modern production of this play: its racial and racist social imagination—and so we dispensed with lines no actor should be asked to speak again. The production team agreed we had a responsibility not to hide the racism of a play so significant in American history, but also a responsibility not to inflict further injury. Several changes in the rehearsal room about how to manage the play’s language surrounding the Numidians came from conversations between Pasternak, Anderson, Francois, and the cast about how to acknowledge the language of power saturating Juba’s lines without reproducing racist injury. One of those scant word changes was the substitution of “higher views,” a term of quantifiable superiority, for the slightly archaic “lofty views,” which suggested a critical but appreciative reading of a Roman worldview. The success of these and other choices to let the dirty laundry air became apparent in the audience reactions to Juba, including audible “hmms” and small exclamations each night. When Juba (played by Francois, who is Black) approaches Cato about Marcia (played by

Palmer, who is white) with “Cato, thou hast a daughter,” Cato’s quick reply “Adieu, young Prince,” proved to be a nervous laugh line in every performance. The familiarity of this racially fraught “not my daughter” dynamic includes an experience of our historical difference as well as of the present lived experience of racism. Eiland (Cato) and Francois (Juba) exemplified what it meant to be embodied stewards of history and agents of possible futures. They found the portal between past and present that runs through language, affect, and history and moved audiences through an experience of recognizing moments both of continuity with and difference from the past each night.

Pasternak’s gender-fluid and racially conscious casting also helped this 21st-century *Cato* confront what Peter DeGabriele explores in *Drone Enlightenment: The Colonial Roots of Remote Warfare*: that debates about sovereignty, colonialism, and territory in the anglophone 18th-century world spoke the language of equality for white male subjects but practiced a politics of asymmetry for all others, while enforcing the entire system by war. As DeGabriele puts it “any possible balance of power within Europe was always unbalanced by an irreducible asymmetry between Europe and the world beyond the line” (2023:33). Sound cues, costumes, and Addison’s own references to desert sands made the connection to this long and ongoing colonial history unavoidable. But to what end? The question of where a colonial war leaves both the indigenous subjects and the resident colonizers is an unresolved chord in *Cato*, though it tends toward a major key through the love plot. Once Cato dies, Juba and Marcia, as well as Portius and Lucia, can proceed toward their respective futures. In Portius’s closing report, we hear that Pompey is bringing enough military aid to enable the escape from Utica that Cato had offered, if not the military victory he wanted. Pasternak left the audience with this future-oriented thought in a final tableau of the young lovers at the forestage corners, grieving Cato’s loss yet also rejoicing in it as the only way to advance the plot, to move on. As Munson sang a haunting a cappella rendition of the early American hymn “Abide with Me,” the cast removed their *Cato* costumes back down to the base costume, placed them in a trunk, and joined hands around it, in reverence, in grief, in solidarity, in an ending that was also the beginning of what came next: the conversation.

At the start of each performance, the audience received a program that included the discussion question, a political question framed as a personal response, like “What did liberty mean for Cato and for George Washington? What does it mean now, for modern Americans?” By far, the question that succeeded the most in generating engaged and substantive discussion was the one that appeared the most personal: “In its time, *Cato* was cheered by people with opposing political views, all of whom saw their values represented in it. Does it still work that way? Who did you want to cheer or boo?” The questions for the audience were constructed to invite conversation and to assuage fears of being politically set up or entrapped, a reasonable concern while talking about an 18th-century tragedy, with 44 mentions of “liberty” or “virtue,” set in North Africa and central to American history, in what we now call a “red” state, with a room full of strangers. The conversation was moderated by a different panel of four to five each night, including at least two actors and two scholars.⁴

Audiences proved more than willing to stay and talk to each other, often taking those conversations out to the sidewalk when we had to close the theatre. But audiences also confessed that they were unsure who to boo or cheer. Over the course of the run, every character in the play was named by an audience member who wanted to cheer or boo them. The most popular answer, however, was Syphax, the Numidian general who speaks to the truth of unjust colonial power relations.

4. In addition to the cast, David F. Taylor (Oxford), Chelsea Phillips (Villanova), Misty G. Anderson (UT, English and Theatre), Jason Shaffer (US Naval Academy), Katy Chiles (UT, English), Christopher Magra (UT, History), Stephen Collins-Elliott (UT, Classics), Amber Albritton (UT, English), Joshua Dunn (UT, IAC), Miles Grier (CUNY Queens), Al Coppola (CUNY John Jay), Bill Lyons (UT, IAC), John Scheb (UT, IAC), and Jonathan Ring (UT, Political Science) all took turns moderating, responding, or teaching through the brief seminar-style discussion that followed the performance each night.

Just as in 1713, *Cato* did not deliver the stable pedagogy of exemplarity that Addison encouraged his readers to embrace in his moral essays. Pope's prolog, spoken by Juba, urged audiences to "be what you behold," but the fact that Whigs cheered the traitorous Sempronius and Whigs and Tories desperately attempted to out-applaud each other at every mention of "liberty" indicated the pedagogical failure in his theatrical success. At the 15 September invited dress talkback, David F. Taylor quoted Pope's admonishment in response to an audience member's observation about the problem of identifying good characters in the play. As Taylor pointed out, Addison, also a moral essayist, is "not just giving you the story but also examples you should be following." But the examples are problematic. Cato is "like a God" who does not know "how to wink at human frailty," leaving little room for humanizing identification. Juba, who is trying to emulate Cato, is the most approachable character, "the character you could be like," in Taylor's words, yet Juba's fulsome praise of Rome and rejection of Numidia goes down hard in the 21st century. The performance's meaning at Valley Forge, with the outcome of the war still uncertain, must have likewise loomed inconclusively for those who watched it. The audience's reactions, their questions, and each postshow conversation illustrated Daniel O'Quinn's point that while theatre mediates history, the causal relationship between historical events and their mediation is inchoate, even in a particular moment of experience (O'Quinn 2022:15).

III. Playing Syphax

(by *Shinnerrie Jackson*)

My involvement with the R/18 production of *Cato* began because of a very different play. I was playing the role of Wiletta in *Trouble in Mind* at the Clarence Brown Theatre when I was offered the role of the Numidian General Syphax in *Cato*. Syphax and Wiletta are not related in any way except for the fact that I played them, and therefore they would be two characters played as people of African ancestry. Knowing what we know now about race and gender politics, my constant inquiry became, how do I play the role of Syphax in the context in which it was written and bring a 21st-century point of view? Playing Syphax meant playing the relationship between the Empire and the Other. My approach to playing the role of Syphax became a discovery of the racial and gendered implications of bringing *Cato* into the 21st century. The Roman Republic, represented by Cato in the play, is at war with the growing Roman Empire, represented by a never seen but always talked about Caesar. Allegiance to the Roman Republic or to Caesar's Empire is the focus for the main action of the play. Pasternak's movement direction gave each of us the latitude to bring our own sense of body and space to each role, but with references to an embodied history of power: in Cato's stiffness, in Juba's movement between regal control and slight supplication, in Marcus's martial energy spilling over the bounds of military discipline. Our critical reflections on the vast histories of race, empire, gender, and power unfolded through a representation of their lived persistence in affect, gesture, and visual expression as well as in language.

To perform *Cato* required us to grapple with the sexual violence the play describes. One such example is Sempronius's soliloquy at the close of act 3, made even more shocking coming from a female actor's mouth:

SEMPRONIUS: Heav'ns, what a Thought is there! *Marcia's* my own!
 How will my Bosom swell with anxious Joy,
 When I behold her struggling in my Arms,
 With glowing Beauty, and disorder'd Charms,
 While Fear and Anger, with alternate Grace,
 Pant in her Breast, and vary in her Face!
 So *Pluto*, seiz'd of *Proserpine*, convey'd
 To Hell's tremendous Gloom th' affrighted Maid.
 There grimly smil'd, pleas'd with the beauteous Prize,
 Nor envy'd *Jove* his Sun-shine and his Skies: (3.1.360–69)

Munson's lines produced no laughter, even at a student matinee. In another chilling and casual approach to rape, as Syphax I had to remind Juba, who is longing for Marcia and stinging from Cato's rejection, that:

SYPHAX: Juba Commands Numidia's hardy troops.
~~Mounted on Steeds, unused to the Restraint
Of Curbs or Bits, and fleetier than
the Winds:~~
Give but the Word, we'll snatch this Damsel up
And bear her off. (2.1.327–32)

When Juba expresses shock and moral outrage at the proposed rape, Syphax replies:

Honour's a fine imaginary Notion
That draws in raw and unexperienced Men
To real mischiefs, while they hunt a Shadow. (2.1.337–39)

My delivery sought to further expose Juba's idealization of Roman honor, which, as Taylor and Anderson noted earlier, imagines he could have access to Addison's liberal, Lockean construction of the political subject as having "a property in his own person" when in fact he can't (Locke [1689] 1988:287). The same is true for the majority of the characters in the play, most obviously for women and the colonial subjects (fig. 5).

During the reading of the play, I kept grappling with the representation of the Numidians. I was struck by the way that, even in a play written at and about a time prior to modern definitions of racial identity, the North Africans were written to be pawns in the greater schemes of imperial domination (see Chiles 2014; Ndiaye 2022; Wheeler 2000). In the characters of Syphax and Juba, Addison wrote two powerful men native to the land but loyal only to a conqueror. What might have been the space of arguing for the future of Numidia is overwhelmed by the objectives of the empire and its drive to maximize its power and wealth under the watchwords of Liberty and freedom. Addison has written two distinct characters who are unwittingly manipulated by the powers of the outside world without the consideration of their native Numidian identities.

In Juba, we see a Numidian man trying to shirk his Numidian heritage to better align himself with Cato's version of Roman virtue. He is so taken by it that he continually uses Cato's words to lecture Syphax. This representation of Juba shows us the "good subject" who doesn't so much turn his back on his race or countrymen but instead melds and folds his identity into the dominant conquering culture. Even after cutting some of the most egregious examples of Juba's fawning praise of Rome, his position in the play was unmistakable. During one of our talkbacks, audience member McKinley Merritt astutely labeled him an assimilationist, a man of color twisting himself to fit into Roman society in Numidia in a pattern that resonates with members of today's societal hierarchies and those of certain racial identities. The duality of the conquered is displayed so well in Juba, with what W.E.B. Du Bois would later call "double consciousness." Juba lives in that duality—"a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" ([1903] 2007:3)—because he is a Numidian prince, not yet a king, who cannot take his rightful place until the conquerors decide who will rule his own country. He becomes assimilated into Cato's Rome and Cato's ideology as the only means of the survival of his native identity.

As I read about my character, I began to see Syphax operating in this duality as well, yet holding fast to his cultural identity. In the beginning of the play, he aligns himself with Sempronius in the planned coup/betrayal. He is charged with convincing Prince Juba that he is on the wrong side. Syphax is more concerned with partaking of the power that the Empire wields and offers than he is about preserving his own nation and identity. He is a person who has aligned himself with power but is not individually powerful. Syphax understands that he and his countrymen are being

used, but he still sees it as an opportunity to rise with Caesar. In the end he finds the truth: the wolves, when cornered, will eat your face. His “double consciousness” is a bit nuanced because he believes in the virtues and cultural worth of the Numidians, as evident in his arguments with Juba, but sees similar attributes in the Empire and not the Republic. He is still viewing himself and his countrymen with the gaze of the conqueror.

Syphax’s justification for siding with Caesar has come down to one realization: that the only way Numidians can remain true to their cultural identity is to bend the knee to Caesar. This for him is liberty under the circumstances of imperialism. It is this mindset and ideology that I used to move through the character’s arc in the play. Syphax has an intimate perspective of the culture and personality of Numidia, and he is using those to manipulate and pursue his own agenda. Should he get his wish, it would still leave his country in the hands of a tyrant and under Roman rule. He speaks to Juba as if, by siding with Caesar, Numidians will have a voice. But he himself has no voice within the partnership with Sempronius. Sempronius gets to teach, scold, and introduce strategy for the betrayal. Syphax, as powerful a general as he is, still is under Sempronius’s rule.

In the essay “Rereading Joseph Addison’s *Cato*: The Meaning and Function of Syphax as the Other,” Chung-Ho Chung sees Syphax and Juba as representations of the Oriental *dramatis personae* (Chung 1988:34), pulling from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). This framing has since been proven racist; however, it is interesting to me because here we have a person of color, nonwhite, non-Black, who is identifying with the two nonwhite characters in the play. Chung states that he had a different reading from his European counterparts when engaging with *Cato*. He relates to Syphax and Juba as Other, citing his own personal experience as the Other in certain settings. I too read and performed Syphax from the point of view of the Other. Chung’s essay was written at a time when the archaic and racist terminology *oriental* and *occidental* were used to highlight the imperialist nature of the Roman Republic and then Empire. His insight into the play helped



Figure 5. From left: Ithamar Francois as Juba and Shinnerrie Jackson as Syphax in *Cato* by Joseph Addison, directed by Charles Pasternak. Clarence Brown Lab Theatre, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2023. (Photo by Taryn Farro)

me to understand that though race was not a major factor in Addison's creative work, as a modern audience we must grapple with these characters not just as subjects of the empire or republic but as pawns for the nascent ideology of the dominant culture's separation of European and African or "white" and Black.

Having Black bodies play North African characters in an 18th-century play brings *Cato* into the modern discussion about colonization, race, and the hierarchies that support them. This would not have been the case in the early performances of the play so there would have been no reason for a discussion at that time of how the Numidians are used. I see Syphax and Juba as racial foils in Addison's attempt to talk about liberty of the dominant race. It's almost as if for the empire to practice their own definitions of liberty, they must take it away from the Other. In an attempt to have the discussion of the play's relevance in our time, we must grapple with and examine the use of race at the time of the setting and writing of *Cato*.

Though there is no one direct line or passage that warrants it, I think this play in the modern context lends itself to include the discussion of the conquered people in an empire. It only speaks of "liberty" by way of the imperialist, not full autonomous liberty for the Numidian people. This play gives us two very powerful and human characters in Juba and Syphax who highlight the hierarchical disparities between the Romans and Numidians. The fallacy of liberty in the play becomes clear once we realize that Numidia as its own separate, free entity is not even thinkable for any of the characters. Liberty for the Numidians is only gained in claiming Rome. To me as the actor, this absent possibility gets at the broad and global question of what the world without imperialism is or, perhaps better, what it might yet be. *Cato* presents the modern audience with an opportunity to discuss imperialism, colonial rule, and the role of the conqueror in atonement. In our times as we engage and question the merits of this play, it is possible to see Addison's ideas of liberty as fallacies and, at the same time, to reinvent what liberty could yet be today.

The original impetus behind this production was to create the conditions for both a 21st-century *Cato* and a community conversation, to reveal a certain history and talk back to it. Student matinees are often hard on actors, specifically in the case of historical plays. The students are usually bored and they don't want to be there. This one was different. Right at the start, the students were interested in the love story of Marcia and Portius and in the conflict between Portius and Marcus, who loved the same woman. As soon as Portius started talking about his love, the students were humming, responding, and reacting. They were invested in the play because of the romance, not the political discourse. Given past declarations about *Cato*'s unstageable nature and the existence of the 1764 version *Cato...Without the Love Scenes*, this cut, which foregrounded relationships, proved that the personal, in the form of the love plot, was the way into this political play. Grace Durham of the L&N STEM Academy in Knoxville surprised us with her comment that "While the show's dialog is fairly complex, I feel like it was easy to grasp with the context given about it being shown in Valley Forge." Context and relationships seemed to help students approach the play and even embrace it. Given their experience with dystopian young adult fiction like *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, the love triangle was familiar to this audience—a way in. They also connected immediately to the specific conflict between the desires of one character and another. One University of Tennessee student, Szaviea Wynn, was deeply moved after seeing the play, tearing up when talking about the characters. She announced that it was the first play she had ever seen, and that she loved it; over the course of the short run, she came back to see it three times.

As Syphax, trying to get Juba to understand why Caesar was better for the Numidian people than Cato, I felt the students were on my side because I was talking about Numidian identity. Juba holds Cato in such high esteem but Cato is not Numidian. Suleyka Alonzo of Knoxville's Fulton High School connected to the play through my performance, commenting, "she showed this double-edged sword character that betrays Prince Juba in an attempt to save him from having the same fate as Cato." When I declared to Juba, "This dread of nations, this almighty Rome, / that comprehends in her wide empires bounds / all under heav'n, was founded on a rape," one young woman responded, very audibly, "PREACH." Seeing their reactions and reading their comments

showed that they found the play approachable. As long as I was encouraging Juba to help his people by siding with him, they were with me, until Syphax insults Juba, dismissing him by saying “go, go, you’re young” (Addison [1713] 2004:2.5.59). When Juba snaps back with “Gods, must I tamely bear [...] thou art a false old traitor,” they turned on me, siding with Juba. I directed my next line, an aside, “I have gone too far,” to a row of young women in the second row, who responded immediately; when I then followed with “I must appease the storm or perish in it,” they were in conversation with me, agreeing, nodding, fully engaged.

Diana Taylor has eloquently argued that repertoire activates memories of past performances, “transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next,” but it also maps out possible futures (2003:20–21). *Cato* in 2023, as *Cato* in 1713 or 1778, turned out to be animated by a sense of spectatorial and political precarity, a moment in which one might be watching the end, whether of democracy or of an empire, not sure what to think, feel, or do about it. *Cato*’s orientation to the future is one of loss, of a past perfect that always already performs its imperfections, its failures, its injustices. But it also asks: what comes next for the living? The community conversations that were a part of each performance unfolded in a moment of violent division in American political discourse, and as American theatres continued to struggle to reassemble new audiences after the isolating years of Covid-19, discourse that was mounting on the isolating convenience of virtual media. The Knoxville *Cato* foregrounded what it means to share in an experience of cultural memory, however repressed or deformed, and to recognize how it shapes our present. Intelligibility, repetition, and recognition are all part of how repertoire works, as Tracy Davis argues, in circuits of showing and experience:

Thus repertoire—as a semiotic of showing and a phenomenology of experiencing—involves processes of reiteration, revision, citation and incorporation. It accounts for durable meanings, not as memory per se but in the improvisation of naming which sustains intelligibility. (2009:7)

To return to both the *Cato* of theatrical repertoire and, perhaps more significantly, the repertoire of US American political origin narratives, was an undertaking we approached with both a sense of responsibility and trepidation. It was a profound, risky form of civic engagement; this company found that it was ultimately worth the risk.

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