

'Trouble the Water' Triumphs at the Theatricum

By Annemarie Donkin

Robert Henry Smalls—a name that should stand in history alongside Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman—was an American politician, publisher, businessman and maritime pilot.

Born into slavery in Beaufort, SC in 1839 and nicknamed “Trouble,” as a young man Smalls went to work as a laborer, taught himself to read and worked as a longshoreman in Charleston where he learned to pilot a transport ship. Smalls earned \$1 a week and knew he could never buy his freedom or that of his wife—but he had plans to escape.

Inspired by the little-known, larger-than-life true story of Robert Smalls, Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum presents the world premiere of *Trouble the Water*, freely adapted by Ellen Geer from the 2019 award-winning historical novel by Rebecca Dwight Bruff.

Geer’s resulting play is dramatically informative and enlightening starting with the opening scene as Smalls’ uncle is hung. The production is filled with trauma, small moments of joy, heartbreak and lingering tragedy—to let the world know what horrors transpired since 1619 and resonate to this day.

Longtime Theatricum company member Gerald C. Rivers (who voiced the audiobook version of

Bruff’s first novel) masterfully directs the large cast and ensemble and narrates as the older Robert Smalls, which puts the play in context.

At the end of the evening, the audience will leave singing “Wade in the Water,” with a new understanding of what it really means.

Overall, the production is worthy of becoming part of theatrical canon—*Trouble the Water* is a *tour-de-force*!

The power of the play is due not only to the outstanding cast and direction by Rivers, but also to the conscientious care by Theatricum Artistic Director Ellen Geer, who spent two years during the COVID-19 lockdown researching and writing a “free adaptation” for the stage. It is the right vehicle for our time when so much of America’s “hidden history” is coming to the fore. With accuracy and fidelity to Black culture, Geer has managed a theatrical stunner that brings the truth of America’s dark past up close and uncomfortable, yet we can be proud to see that someone like Smalls is part of our legacy of what freedom really means.

Piloting a Ship to Freedom

In Smalls’ most daring plan, in the early hours of May 13, 1862, when he and a small crew stayed onboard to guard the ship, Smalls dressed as the captain and stealthily piloted the transport steamer CSS Planter, fully



PHOTO BY IAN FLANDERS

Terrence Wayne, Jr. as the younger Robert Smalls embraces his wife to be, as Smalls’ older self, Gerald Rivers, looks on, almost as if conjuring the happy memory.

loaded with Confederate munitions, past checkpoints in Charleston harbor toward the Union blockade that surrounded it. It was a short, yet harrowing journey. If they had failed to give the correct signals at the right time, they would have all been killed or returned to slavery.

Once Smalls and the crew hit the Union blockade, however, they were free and his plan saved his family, his crewmen and their families.

These actions earned him Union hero status, \$1,500, and an audience with President Abraham Lincoln. His act of bravery and those of others also helped convince Lincoln to accept African-American soldiers into the Union Army.

After the War, Smalls returned to Beaufort, bought his slave master’s house and became a politician, winning election as a Republican to the South Carolina Legislature and the United States House of Representatives during Reconstruction.

It is a matter of public record that Smalls also authored state legislation providing for South Carolina to have the first free and compulsory public-school system in the United States.

Yet, Southern historians obliterated Smalls’ story because he was an embarrassment to the Confederacy as he became the first African-American hero of the American Civil War.

The Cast and Crew

Rivers, a dynamic voiceover artist, inspirational speaker, the voice of Martin Luther King, and a master West African drummer and teacher, narrates the play as the older Robert Smalls, while the sensational young actor Terrence Wayne, Jr. plays his younger self, nicknamed “Trouble.”

A longtime Theatricum member, the great Earnestine Phillips stars as Smalls’ mother, Lydia, enslaved in the house of Henry and Jane McKee, who are played by Alistair McKenzie and Robyn Cohen.

The heartbreaking and funny Rodrick Jean-Charles portrays Smalls’ Uncle George, brother to Reuben (Clarence Powell) who was hanged the night Trouble was born.

The beautiful young Tiffany Coty stars as Smalls’ girlfriend and first wife, Hannah, while the lovely

Michelle Merring plays his second wife in his later years.

Bloodthirsty and cruel with the whip, Franc Ross plays neighboring slave owner and Confederate firebrand Robert Barnwell Rhett, and Justin Blanchard plays the ineffectual Reverend French who does nothing to stop the horror.

Rounding out the ensemble were Matthew Clair, Joseph Darby, Emerson Haller, Ethan Haslam, Fallon Heaslip, Frank Krueger, Eden Lederer, Joelle Lewis, Tariq Mierden, Danezian Mills, Michaela Molder, Kenneth Montley, Venice Mountain-Zona, Susan Stangl, Sage Michael Stone, Monique Thompson and Elliott Grey Wilson.

The action of the play is punctuated by Negro spirituals, sung by the a cappella group Street Corner Renaissance (NBC’s *The Sing Off, Season 4*; PBS special *DooWop Generation*), featuring members Charles (Sonny) Banks, Robert Henley III, Maurice Kitchen, Torrence Brannon Reese and Anthony Snead.

The title *Trouble the Water* comes from the African American spiritual, *Wade in the Water*.

The creative team for *Trouble the Water* includes lighting designer Hayden Kirschbaum; sound designer Marshall McDaniel; costume designer Yuan Yuan Liang; prop master Dante Carr; dramaturg Stuart K. Robinson and cultural competency coordinator Kikanza Nuri-Robins. Kim Cameron is the production stage manager.

Trouble the Water is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and plays on Theatricum’s outdoor stage in Topanga through October 2. Meet novelist Rebecca Dwight Bruff at the prologue (pre-show discussion) on Saturday, Sept. 24 from 6:30-7 p.m.

Theatricum Botanicum Tickets

The amphitheater is terraced into the hillside, so audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance. Check the Theatricum website prior to each performance for current, up-to-date COVID-19 safety protocols.

Tickets range from \$10 to \$42. Premium seating is available for \$60.

Children four and under are free. Pay What You Will (cash only at the door) ticket pricing will be available on the following dates: Friday, Aug. 5 at 7:30 p.m.; Friday, Aug. 26 at 7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, Sept. 4 at 3:30 p.m. For a complete schedule of performances, to purchase tickets and for information including up-to-date COVID-19 protocols on the day of each performance, call (310) 455-3723 or visit theatricum.com.

Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley.