

Freedom Flight

TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE



 **MAD RIVER**
THEATER WORKS

ALLIANCE
ARTIST MANAGEMENT

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We believe that theater can make a difference. Through theater we strive to challenge racism, sexism and intolerance. Our plays aim to be joyful and entertaining experiences that take our audiences, often children, to the historic moments where individuals make hard decisions to stand on the side of what is right.

Freedom Flight – The Characters, The Story and The Journey

The Characters

Evelyn is an African American senior in High School. She lives in a small town in Ohio and dreams of becoming an Ornithologist one day. Why birds? She never quite knows, but she paints lovely pictures in her mind about the way they travel and the way they return. She studies them and seeks them out, in the woods and parks surrounding her home. The language of the birds and the ways that humans organize them, the nomenclature, fascinates her.

Comparing the Latin naming of birds to regional or ‘folk’ names is a secret passion. Why keep this knowledge secret? She doesn’t know that either. Perhaps something inside of her feels like it is knowledge too precious to share.

In a distant past, Addison White is an expert salt-maker. But quickly we learn there is a dark-side for this man’s knowledge and passion, for he is an enslaved person working on a plantation, and the fruits of his labor, the beautiful salt which protects and preserves, is also used against him and those of his kind after brutal and intolerable whippings. By

the time we meet Addison, he is running from slavery and his days of making salt are behind him, but as we’ll learn they follow him in mind and body, on his journey towards freedom.

In the shadows we learn that there are people that live, work and fight for abolition – the undoing and removal of slavery. These abolitionists believe that the systems of oppression are far past unkind or amoral – they are a degradation of the human spirit and need to be eradicated from human society. Udney Hyde and his daughter Amanda share this mentality and help those traveling North to freedom, along the Underground Railroad. The Hyde’s use their farm and their grain wagon to do this. As the story of *Freedom Flight* unfolds we learn that their friendship with Addison White will create more of a lasting influence on their community than any other person that they help North.

The Story

On the day that we meet Evelyn, she has gone to the local park and fields to observe birds in their natural habitat. Rather than enjoying her quiet, personal time in the woods, she is accused by a Security Guard for having bad intentions. This instance is yet another where she is confronted by the many aggressions that come with being a black adolescent. She has feelings of being trapped in a loop of powerlessness and quickly,



the quiet in these woods becomes a kind of fear within her. In her frustration, Evelyn decides to look for answers in a trunk that has been in her family for generations. Why look there? Again, much like the interest she has for birds and the inner-voice which cautions her to keep her passions to herself, there is an indescribable urge to open the trunk, long kept in her Aunt Ida's house.

Although this trunk is rarely spoken about it contains memorabilia. Wiping off the dust and opening the long sealed trunk, Evelyn finds many intriguing and haunting things: a wanted poster, a civil war uniform hat, newspaper clippings, Underground Railroad instructions, an old Bible and letters that all belong to her ancestor Addison White.

Evelyn falls asleep and when she awakes, possibly in a dream state, she meets this ancestor Addison and follows him on his journey to Mechanicsburg, OH out of slavery. Addison doesn't know what is in front of him, but from her conversation and research into family history, she knows what his path will be. She tries to give him council but he won't hear her advice:

Evelyn: *What if I told you everything that I learned about how your story turns out? You ready to hear it?*

Addison: *What would be the point of that? I got to learn my own lessons. That's the best part about being free.*

The Journey

At the heart of Evelyn's journey is the question: What can the past teach her? Much like her intuitive drive to learn more and more about birds, she begins to wonder what it means to be free. *Freedom Flight* tells the real life story of the extraordinary man, Addison White, and his friendship with white Abolitionist Udney Hyde, his daughter Amanda, and the many folks along the way who helped or tried to hinder him in his freedom flight. Through the eyes, mind and spirit of a contemporary descendant, the play collapses time from the 1850s to the present as Evelyn journeys through past stories to create her own future, reflecting a new found spirit for, and understanding of, freedom.





Director and Playwright Statement

By Daniel Carlton

How many of us have wondered what it would be like to fly like a bird? I would say “many of us” is a safe bet. Dreams give us a chance to do that. We can soar above our problems, fears, confusions, anxieties, bullies, and even unsolved questions. Dreams allow us to visit the past, observe the present, and imagine the future. Even scary dreams teach us lessons about the things on our minds.

When thinking about writing *Freedom Flight*, I had several thematic questions related to dreams and family history that I wanted to explore:

- 1) What would happen if we went into a dream so deeply that we imagined that we could affect our ancestor’s decisions in all of the best ways?
- 2) How does our imagination fill in the missing pieces of our family history?
- 3) What is freedom?
- 4) How are people like birds? How are they different?
- 5) What is a ‘freedom flight’ for a person?
- 6) What would an African American teenager’s dream look, feel, and sound like with all of these questions happening?



Inspiration and Material

The story of Addison White a formerly enslaved African American who ran away to Ohio from Kentucky in 1856 is at the heart of this play. Outside the small village of Mechanicsburg, Ohio, Addison met a man named Udney Hyde who helped shelter him. Addison White refused to keep running to Canada because he wanted to pay back Udney’s kindness by helping him out on his farm. When Federal Marshals came to arrest Mr. Hyde and Addison White, attempting to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, the townspeople of Mechanicsburg drove the Marshalls out, refusing to let make the arrest.

Chris Westhoff (Managing and Musical Director of Mad River Theater Works) and I interviewed Addison White’s descendent John Booth who grew up in that same town. He told us of the many challenges that he faced growing up there over 150 years later. Historic information came from many sources, including the work of research librarian and author Kathy Shulz. Her book, *Enlightened Trails: The Underground Railroad in Ohio* explores not only the history of the Underground Railroad but also the myth and lore surrounding it. We are indebted to her work. We also referenced historical documents and newspaper articles in the collection of The Gammon House, a historic Underground Railroad site in Springfield, OH. There, we saw the



few remaining photographs and belongings of Addison's, and consulted a newspaper article about Mr. Booth's aunt burning many of the contents of a trunk that held items that belonged to Addison White because she didn't want to hold onto things that were connected to slavery.

Also inspirational to the work is a book called "Sparrow Envy" by J. Drew Lanham about an African American Bird watcher. This book mixes poetry and observations about the joys and challenges of being an African American Ornithologist. This includes being harassed or treated like a criminal by suspicious people in bird watching settings (particularly due to the fact that there are very few people from his culture in the field).



Sankofa

"Sankofa" is a Ghanaian word that translates to "Go back and fetch it." It also refers to a mythical bird whose feet are firmly planted forward while its head is turned backwards carrying a precious egg in its mouth. To me, and in the context of *Freedom Flight*, it means that we can look at the past to get what we need for a better future. How do people from different cultures, ages, genders and time periods come together to combat racism? How do we tell the story in a way that doesn't make someone the savior with all of the power just because history books lean in that direction?

Finally, I share this poem by Langston Hughes:

Dreams

*Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die life is a broken-winged bird
that can not fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams for when dreams go, life is a barren field frozen
with snow.*



Addison White



Glossary

Abolitionist

A person who wants to stop or abolish slavery: an advocate of abolition.

Ornithology

The scientific study of birds.

Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was a network of clandestine routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early- to mid-19th century. It was used by enslaved African Americans primarily to escape into free states and Canada. The network was assisted by abolitionists and others sympathetic to the cause of the escapees.

Enslaved

Made a slave; held in slavery or bondage: Enslaved people were seen not as people at all but as commodities to be bought, sold, and exploited.

Legacy

The long-lasting impact of particular events, actions, etc. that took place in the past, or of a person's life.



Fugitive Slave Act

Statutes passed by Congress in 1793 and 1850 (and repealed in 1864) that provided for the seizure and return of runaway “slaves” who escaped from one state into another or into a federal territory. The 1793 law enforced Article IV, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution in authorizing any federal district judge or circuit court judge, or any state magistrate, to decide finally and without a jury trial the status of an alleged fugitive slave. For some time after the beginning of the American Civil War, the Fugitive Slave Acts were considered to still hold in the case of blacks fleeing from “masters” in border states that were loyal to the Union government. It was not until June 28, 1864, that the Acts were repealed.



Freedom

Liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another.

Sankofa

Sankofa is a Ghanaian akansha symbol that translates to “look to the past to inform the future.” This sheds light on the struggles of enslaved African peoples; though long gone, slavery is still a large chunk of African American history, and should be acknowledged rather than forgotten in order to move forward productively. The symbol itself is depicted by a bird which appears to be moving forward while looking back, supporting the idea of incorporating the aspects of the past into the future.



Flight

The act, manner, or power of flying. An escape from a particular situation. The act of leaving.



Study Guide Questions

What moment or character stood out for you in the play? Why?

Characters in stories form relationships and learn lessons from each other. Which exchange between characters in the play were the most interesting to you? Why?

What lesson did Evelyn learn from her journey in the play? What did you learn?

What is something about American History that was discussed or portrayed in the play that you already knew about?

What is something that you didn't know about that surprised you?

If you were a bird, what kind would you be? Why?



Have you ever been afraid of something? If so, how did you conquer the fear? Write a story or a poem about that experience with as many specific details as you can include.

Much of our play is about our family history's and the way they influence us, if we know them or not. Have you ever asked about your ancestors and their experiences? Do you know where and when they lived? What did you learn? Do you see similarities in the experiences they had and those that you have?

Write a letter to an ancestor and ask them questions about their experiences. Even if they can't answer this letter, putting down the questions you might like to know the answers to might be very helpful.

Write another letter, poem or song to a possible descendant of yours. What do you want them to know about the life you're living and the experiences you're having?



Reading List

The Home Place by J.Drew Lanham

Sparrow Envy by J. Drew Lanham

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

Sing Unburied Sing by Jesmyn Ward

The Underground Railroad in Ohio: Enlightened Trails by Kathy Shulz

To Be a Slave by Julius Lester

