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# **The Reclamation of Madison Hemings**

By

CHARLES SMITH

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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“*The Reclamation of Madison Hemings* had its premiere at Indiana Repertory Theatre, March 2022, Janet Allen, Artistic Director;  
Suzanne Sweeney, Managing Director.”

“*The Reclamation of Madison Hemings* was commissioned by the Goodman Theatre, Robert Falls, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfer, Executive Director.”

*The Reclamation of Madison Hemings* was commissioned and workshopped by the Goodman Theatre (Chicago) in December 2019.

CAST:

MADISON HEMINGS..... John Cothran Jr.  
ISRAEL JEFFERSON .....Stephen McKinley Henderson

PRODUCTION:

Director ..... Ron OJ Parson  
Artistic Director .....Robert Falls  
Executive Director ..... Roche Schulfer

The play was subsequently workshopped by Indiana Repertory Theatre (Indianapolis) in December 2021 and received its world premiere in March 2022.

WORKSHOP CAST:

MADISON HEMINGS..... John Beasley  
ISRAEL JEFFERSON .....David Alan Anderson

PREMIERE CAST:

MADISON HEMINGS..... Brian Anthony Wilson  
ISRAEL JEFFERSON .....David Alan Anderson

PRODUCTION:

Director ..... Ron OJ Parson  
Artistic Director ..... Janet Allen  
Executive Director ..... Suzanne Sweeney  
Scenic Designer .....Shaun Motley  
Costume Designer ..... Dana Rebecca Woods  
Lighting Designer ..... Jared Gooding  
Composer & Sound Designer ..... Christopher Kris  
Projections Designer .....Mike Tutaj  
Assistant to the Director..... Ansley Valentine  
Guest Dramaturg ..... Tanya Palmer  
Resident Dramaturg ..... Richard Rogers  
Stage Manager .....Nathan Garrison  
Assistant Stage Manager..... Becky Roeber

# **The Reclamation of Madison Hemings**

## **CHARACTERS**

**MADISON HEMINGS:** Son of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. Early 60s. He is a practically minded man hungry for validation. He is charming, has a wry sense of humor and thinks he knows everything there is to know.

**ISRAEL JEFFERSON:** Former enslaved footman to Thomas Jefferson. Mid 60s. Patient, methodical and spiritual. He communes with the dead on a regular basis.

**TIME:** Five days in mid-November, 1866.

**PLACE:** Monticello, in Virginia.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

**SETTING:** The land to the west of Monticello's main house, one year after the end of the Civil War. This once opulent Antebellum plantation and surrounding lands have fallen into disrepair.

Although we cannot see any physical structures, the main house or “nickel side” of Monticello could be represented via projections that may change and/or evolve during the play. A small buckboard wagon sits off to one side.

**DESIGN:** The central scenic image is the buckboard wagon. In Scene 1, it contains a few wooden boxes the men use to sit on, two shovels, cooking utensils, an oiled or waxed canvas tent roll and a Henry or Spencer repeating rifle. At the top of Scene 2, Madison loads a door or two onto the wagon. In Scene 3, the wagon is absurdly overloaded with recovered architectural salvage from Monticello. After the wagon collapses, it should resemble a pile of worthless rubble. This pile of rubble, the remnants of a bygone era, is the final image of the play. It's what the men leave behind when they walk away at the end of the play.

The representation of the physical location of the wagon, the west lawn of the Monticello estate, could be anything from a realistic depiction of neglected land to an abstracted void.

Design should also account for the location of the grave revealed at the end of the play. This location should be identified as part of the initial design and not left to the actors and/or director to discover during rehearsal.

Depending upon the design of the wagon, the play can be performed with or without an intermission. If an intermission is needed, it should be after Scene 2.

# The Reclamation of Madison Hemings

## Scene 1

*(MADISON HEMINGS stands surveying the ruin of Monticello.)*

MADISON. I am here, and I can hear you trying to talk to me.

I can hear your voice.

On some days, it's as clear as bright sunshine.

But I can never make out what you trying to say.

Your voice is swimming with all these other voices.

Voices of people arguing.

People laughing.

People loving.

Voices of children who have no idea of what's waiting for them in this world.

I don't know who any of these people are.

The only voice I know is your voice, but I can't decipher what you trying to say.

Your words sound like words I should recognize, but the roots of those words are not connected to anything I know.

If you got something to say to me, say it.

I come a long way to get here.

You got something to say?

Now's the time.

Say it.



*(ISRAEL JEFFERSON enters.)*

ISRAEL. What you doing?

MADISON. Thinking.

ISRAEL. Out loud?

MADISON. Only way I know what I think is by speaking it out loud.

ISRAEL. Thought maybe you were talking to the caretaker.

MADISON. Caretaker?

ISRAEL. He's gotta be around here somewhere.

MADISON. If he is, I ain't seen him.

ISRAEL. Let's make camp, and I'll walk you down to visit your father.

MADISON. I already been there.

ISRAEL. To visit your father?

MADISON. While you were running around looking for the caretaker, I decided to take a walk.

ISRAEL. And?

MADISON. And what?

ISRAEL. What happened?

MADISON. Nothing happened. It's changed, that's all. But everything changes.

ISRAEL. Not everything.

MADISON. They gave him a headstone. Huge monument to mark his grave, but looks like somebody's been chipping at it.

ISRAEL. Folks come here looking for keepsakes.

MADISON. They put up an iron gate, but you can see where folks been climbing over the gate. Chipping away at his headstone. Chipping away at his memory.

ISRAEL. Caretaker supposed to be here to keep folks from doing that.

MADISON. Apparently, caretaker ain't doing his job.

ISRAEL. You talk to him?

MADISON. The caretaker?

ISRAEL. Your father. Did you talk to him?

MADISON. The man is dead, Israel.

ISRAEL. I understand that.

MADISON. Then how am I supposed to talk to him? And what am I supposed to talk to him about?

ISRAEL. I don't know. Get your business straight.

MADISON. I got no business with the dead.

ISRAEL. You can learn a lot from talking to the dead.

MADISON. The only thing the dead can teach me is how not to be dead and last I checked, they wasn't giving up that information.

ISRAEL. Did you wash your hands and say your grace when you got there?

MADISON. No, I did not wash my hands and say my grace.

ISRAEL. You got to wash your hands and say your grace. You got to make sure that when the left comes together with the right ...

*(ISRAEL brings his hands together in prayer.)*

ISREAL *(cont'd)*. That it's a clean union.

MADISON. I got nothing to say to that man. He never had nothing to say to me. I could be standing right in front of him, and he'd look at me like I wasn't even there. Man wouldn't talk to me when he was alive, what I look like trying to talk to him now that he's dead?

ISRAEL. Why'd you go down there then?

MADISON. I wanted to make sure he was still in the ground.

Knowing him, he might've tried to climb up outta there.

ISRAEL. I thought you came here to get your business straight.

MADISON. I got no business with him.

ISRAEL. Then why you come here?

MADISON. I came to help you find your brother.

ISRAEL. I told you I didn't need your help. Didn't I tell you that?

MADISON. You didn't want me to come? Is that what you saying?

ISRAEL. That's not what I'm saying.

MADISON. Then what?

ISRAEL. You told your wife I asked you to come.

MADISON. I never told Mary that.

ISRAEL. Then what you tell her?

MADISON. I didn't tell her nothing.

ISRAEL. So, she's crazy. She just made it all up.

MADISON. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that she might've gotten confused, that's all.

ISRAEL. Didn't sound confused to me. She told me clear as day that you said I asked you to come with me. That I needed your help, and I did not need your help, Madison.

MADISON. You haven't enjoyed my company?

ISRAEL. Enjoying your company and needing your help are two different things. Here, I thought you wanted to come here to get your business straight with your daddy. Turns out, you got me mixed up in the middle of something.

MADISON. You ain't mixed up in the middle of nothing.

ISRAEL. Then what was you two arguing about?

MADISON. Wasn't arguing about nothing.

ISRAEL. Didn't sound like nothing to me.

MADISON. Whatever it was did not concern you.

ISRAEL. Then who did it concern?

MADISON. I just needed to get away for a moment, that's all. I figured I'd ride along with you to keep you company, clear my head and think. That all right with you?

ISRAEL. That's a good start. And when we get back, I'm gon' need you to say that to Mary, and that'll finish it. Got me mixed up in your mess.

*(ISRAEL takes out a pocket telescope. He uses the telescope to survey the area.)*

MADISON. You see anything?

ISRAEL. Nothing.

MADISON. Ain't that a li'l strange?

ISRAEL. Somebody should be here. Caretaker, at least.

MADISON. I saw a mule down by the cemetery.

ISRAEL. A mule?

MADISON. Scared the hell outta me. I didn't know what it was at first. Looked like something dead standing there. Then it turned its head and looked at me with these milky white eyes and I liked to jumped outta my skin. I ain't never seen nothing like that before. Looks like the damned thing's blind and can't find food.

ISRAEL. I bet you that's Randolph's mule.

MADISON. It worked its way off into this corner. All it got to do is turn around, go through the gate and there's a whole field full of grass sitting there waiting for it.

ISRAEL. Phineas. Randolph probably left it up here to die.

MADISON. I never did like Randolph.

ISRAEL. I heard he lost eighty thousand dollars at the end of the war.

MADISON. Eighty thousand?

ISRAEL. Lost all his money, all his property. Lost everything, except for that mule and it was blind.

MADISON. That's what the sonuvabitch gets for siding with the Confederacy.

ISRAEL. That's your nephew you talking about.

MADISON. And you say that to say what?

ISRAEL. Let's make camp. Somebody oughta show up by morning.

MADISON. Why we got to make camp? Why don't we sleep in the house?

ISRAEL. We don't have permission to go into that house.

MADISON. Permission? I ain't asked no man for permission to do nothing since I walked away from here forty-some years ago.

ISRAEL. And now you're back, and we need permission.

MADISON. To sleep in the house my father built?

ISRAEL. Your father did not build that house, Madison. The people your father called "his property" built that house.

MADISON. You know what I meant.

ISRAEL. I know what you meant, but I also heard what you said, and what you said and what you meant are two different things.

MADISON. You know, there was a time you'd come here and the only people you'd see were Hemings. Edwin would be the first person you'd lay eyes on. Remember that? He'd be at the bottom of the hill and would clang the bell to announce your arrival. Wormley would meet you at the top of the hill to take your horse and your coach if you had one. Burwell would meet you at the door to take your wrap. He'd be all buttoned up and proper. Peter would be in the kitchen

concocting some sort of French cuisine. And Mother, well Mother would be inside doing whatever it was that Mother would do. No matter where you look, nothing but Hemings.

ISRAEL. There were other folks here.

MADISON. Not here at the house.

ISRAEL. The Herns were here.

MADISON. The Herns?

ISRAEL. David and Isabel? David built wheelbarrows, fences and gates.

MADISON. I forgot about the Herns.

ISRAEL. How could you forget about the Herns and all them kids?

MADISON. I forgot.

ISRAEL. And I was here. I know you ain't forgot about me. I started as your daddy's fetcher. Fetch water, fetch wood. I made the fire in his study, fire in his bedroom. Whatever he wanted, I fetched it for him.

MADISON. That was a long time ago.

ISRAEL. Not that long ago.

MADISON. Lemme ask you something. If you had to choose between being blind and being deaf, which would you choose?

ISRAEL. What you mean?

MADISON. That mule is standing down there in front of a field full of grass. But it's starving 'cause it's blind and it can't see a way to get to the grass. It knows the grass is there. It can smell it, but it doesn't understand that in order to get to the grass it has to turn around and walk away from the grass and it ain't gon' walk away, not for anything in the world. I saw that mule and I thought, Lord have mercy, if I had to choose between being blind and being deaf, I would choose to be deaf over blind any day.

ISRAEL. Why didn't you turn him around?

MADISON. What?

ISRAEL. Phineas. Why didn't you turn him around and lead him through the gate?

MADISON. I tried, but he's a mule.

ISRAEL. What's that got to do with it?

MADISON. He was very uncooperative. Tried to bite me, so I said to hell with it. You wanna starve to death, be my guest.

*(ISRAEL surveys. MADISON takes out a flask and drinks.)*

MADISON *(cont'd)*. Why don't you put that spyglass away, sit down and knock the dust off? Here, have a sip.

ISRAEL. You know I don't imbibe.

MADISON. You should. I think you would find that an occasional libation would make your life immeasurably better.

ISRAEL. Just make sure you don't drink too much of that before we get set up.

MADISON. Jesus drank wine, did you know that?

ISRAEL. You need to stop talking nonsense before you put something on us that we can't shake.

MADISON. And you need to stop being so damn serious. The man will get here when he gets here. Me having a li'l fun ain't gon' change that.

ISRAEL. He should've been here days ago.

MADISON. Maybe he got delayed by the weather.

ISRAEL. We got delayed and we made it.

MADISON. But we're late. We were supposed to be here days ago, and he was supposed to be here days ago. We just arrived, so stop your fussing. He's gon' show. I know it. I can feel it. Now come on. What about you? Blind or deaf? Which would you choose?

ISRAEL. I wouldn't choose either one.

MADISON. But what if you had to choose?

ISRAEL. Who says I have to choose?

MADISON. I'm saying suppose, Israel. Suppose you had to choose.

ISRAEL. Well, I suppose if I had to choose ...

MADISON. And I'm saying that you do.

ISRAEL. I'd choose to be blind over being deaf.

MADISON. So, you'd be standing there starving to death.

ISRAEL. Until somebody came along and turned me around.

The way I figure it, sight connects you to things, but the ability to hear, that connects you to people, and I'd rather be connected to people over things any day of the week.

*(ISRAEL goes back to his telescope.)*

MADISON. My father used to have a telescope like that. He used to stand here looking out. He'd say, Randolph's on his way. Or he'd say, "Mr. Epps'll be here in an hour." Hour later, Mr. Epps show up. I used to think the telescope was a device for seeing into the future.

ISRAEL. Your father had more than one telescope.

MADISON. Is that a fact?

ISRAEL. Had a whole collection of them. I used to keep them cleaned up and polished for him. Your father had one telescope that he used only for gazing into the heavens. Your father could tell the exact time of day or night just by looking at the stars.

MADISON. Maybe your brother came, didn't see nobody, couldn't find the caretaker, then left. You ever think of that?

ISRAEL. Why would you say such a thing?

MADISON. It's possible.



ISRAEL. He wouldn't have done that.

MADISON. Coulda.

ISRAEL. He wouldn't have come and then left without waiting.

MADISON. Never know. And we can't afford to wait around here forever.

ISRAEL. I know that.

MADISON. Couple days at the most.

ISRAEL. All we need is a couple days. If he's still walking this earth, he's on his way here as we speak. That was our pact, the promise we made. If we ever got outta bondage and lost track of each other, we'd meet up right here, this ground, this land, on the anniversary of the day we were sold, fifteen November and that was three days ago.

MADISON. He could've come last year. Or the year before that if he got liberated.

ISRAEL. If he came before, he'll be back. The war is over. Been over for almost a year now. Every man, woman and child that was held in bondage has been freed. If he's still alive, he's on his way.

MADISON. That's a big if.

ISRAEL. Let's make camp and get a good night's sleep. Things might look better in the morning.

MADISON. I don't know why we don't sleep in the house.

ISRAEL. I told you.

MADISON. So, what we supposed to do? Sleep out here in the rain?

ISRAEL. Who says it's gon' rain?

MADISON. My hip says it's gon' rain.

ISRAEL. We got canvas.

MADISON. Why sleep under canvas when we got this big house sitting there?

ISRAEL. We don't have permission, Madison.

MADISON. Ain't nobody here to give us permission. If there was somebody here to ask, I'd ask. But there ain't nobody here to ask. Caretaker's nowhere to be found.

ISRAEL. Even if he was here, he wouldn't let us go inside. When I come here, he lets me camp. That's the agreement. I come, I camp, I look for Moses, then I go home. But he's never let me go inside.

MADISON. All the time you been coming here, you never went inside?

ISRAEL. Last time I was inside that house was when I worked there.

MADISON. Ain't you at least curious?

ISRAEL. About what?

MADISON. About what's in there.

ISRAEL. Ain't nothing in there. Just a big empty house on the verge of collapsing.

MADISON. Got to be something in there.

ISRAEL. Memories.

MADISON. I didn't come all this way for memories, I can tell you that.

ISRAEL. Ain't nothing valuable in there.

MADISON. How you know if you ain't been inside?

ISRAEL. I know what kind of man the caretaker is. If there was anything valuable in there, he sold it off a long time ago.

MADISON. When was the last time you were here?

ISRAEL. Few years ago.

MADISON. Before the war. You know, things have changed since then. It's a whole new world now.

ISRAEL. How you figure that?