Dyin' Free

A play in two acts
by
Troy Shearer

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DEDICATION

For my grandparents: Nana, Nana, Papa, Papa and Fritz.

SYNOPSIS

Cole, a slave, struggles with the prospect of escaping--the personal struggles and danger it would mean for his family. Escape would also mean forgoing all the trust and faith his "owner," Mr. Jones, had invested in Cole. After much thought, and arguing with his wife, Cole agrees that an opportunity for freedom is worth sacrificing his fairly contented life as a slave.

Their plan of escape, however, is found out. Cole must come face to face with Mr. Jones and suffer the consequences. The cost is great. The slave gives his life for individual freedom. The slave owner keeps his life but ultimately loses as he sacrifices his individual freedom and thought to the societal attitudes that he knows in his heart are wrong.

"Dyin' Free" is not a play about slavery; it is a play about freedom.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

"Dyin' Free" was a finalist at the 2007 Florida Playwrights Competition and as a result received a staged reading on July, 23rd 2008 at the Back Door Theatre in Gulfport, FL by the Gulfport Community Players.

"Dyin' Free" was one of three finalists at the 2008 Valencia Playwriting Competition.

This play also won a competition hosted by "notechtheatre.com" and as a result was fully produced at Indian River Community College in the fall of 2007. That production was entered into the American College Theatre Festival where Dr. Crosby Hunt from Middle Tennessee State University gave it the following review: "Troy Shearer, the young playwright, avoided most of the stereotypes which often mars plays in which the evil is slavery and the primal objective is personal freedom. Instead, Shearer gives us three-dimensional characters and makes as the central question in his play not why bad people do bad things but why decent people are sometimes drawn into an evil activity. The production does a good job…of telling the story, and the audience is engaged, forced to encounter the ideas on a visceral level. It is good to see vibrant and cohesive work by young playwrights."

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Interracial cast of 4 m, 3 w, 2 flexible, 1 child)

SAMUEL: A small farm/slave owner in search of freedom from convention; in his 40s.
REBECCA: His traditional wife, also in her 40s.
SAMMY: Their antagonistic son, 18.
COLE: A contented slave in his early 30s.
HANNAH: His eager wife of the same age.
ABNER: The Joneses' obedient house slave. In his 60s.
EDMOND: The oldest and crankiest of the field slaves, also in his 60s.
CHARLES: A hardworking field slave, 20s.
ABBY: Charles' wife of the same age.
CHARLEY: Charles and Abby's 9-year-old boy.

**Two of the roles, Edmond and Abner, were written as men but could easily be changed to women to fit your theatre's needs. Also, the role of Charley could be changed to a girl.*

SETTING

"Dyin' Free" takes place on a small Maryland slave farm in 1859, some 5 years before the eventual abolition of slavery.

The Fields: A basic outdoor setting lined with rows of corn. Barrels and crates serve as sitting areas and a water pump pins the downstage area.

The Slave Quarters: An old wooden shack with an open door and windows. There are two benches for sitting.

The Big House: A typical 19th century living room. A fireplace on the upstage wall and an elegant couch make up the area.

**To fit your theatre's possible space limitations and budget, it is possible to stage all three of these sets simultaneously throughout the show. A small, defined acting space upstage right could serve as the slave quarters; a brighter, upstage left area for the master's living room; and the entire downstage takes the place of the fields.*

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: It is a peaceful Sunday morning. On stage can be seen vertical rows of corn, head high, and the blue sky in the distance. In the center of the stage, the rows of corn split, making a walkway. COLE appears upstage [US] of this aisle. He wears a straw hat. He walks downstage [DS], through the corn, as HE quietly sings.)

COLE: *(Singing.)*
STEAL AWAY,
STEAL AWAY,
STEAL AWAY TO JESUS.
STEAL AWAY,
STEAL AWAY HOME.
I AIN'T GOT LONG TO STAY HERE.
(HE removes his hat and prays.) Another week's gone by, Lord, not much changed down here. I suppose it is a bit hotter than last week. But we all still healthy and, all in all, we still happy, Lord, and I thank you for that.

(SAMUEL JONES and ABNER enter from US. SAMUEL is dressed for church. ABNER is dressed to drive the Joneses to church.)

COLE: *(Cont'd.)* I jus' ask you to keep lookin' over us all, Lord; my wife Hannah, Edmond and Abner, Charles and his wife Abby, and their little boy Charley. *(Remembering.)* Oh, and Mr. and Mrs. Jones too. That's all I ask, Lord. Amen.
SAMUEL: Amen.
COLE: *(Puts HIS hat back on.)* Mr. Jones, you scared the breath right outta me. Mornin' Abner, I was just prayin' 'bout you.
ABNER: God knows I needs it.
SAMUEL: You forgot Sammy.
COLE: What's that?
SAMUEL: Mr. and Mrs. Jones and their son Sammy.

COLE: Yes, sir, I reckon you right. *(HE takes off his hat and looks up.)* And Sammy too, Lord. Amen.
ABNER: Amen.
SAMUEL: You go on and get that carriage ready, Abner. I've got to talk to Cole here for a moment.
ABNER: Yes, sir, Mr. Jones. *(HE exits.)*
SAMUEL: It's shaping up to be a beautiful day.
COLE: Mighty fine day. A bit hot.
SAMUEL: You think it's hot in Maryland; you've never been to Georgia.
COLE: Nope, never been nowhere but Maryland.
SAMUEL: Then it appears you are the lucky one. I was raised in Georgia and I can tell you that it is a hell of a place, and I mean that literally.
COLE: Literally, sir?
SAMUEL: That means it was hot, hot as hell.
COLE: Nope, don't suppose I'd like it there.
SAMUEL: You folks not having your gathering this morning?
COLE: Gatherin', sir?
SAMUEL: I know you all get together in there every Sunday and say a few prayers. I don't mind if you want to save your souls.
COLE: I like to say a few prayers of my own first is all.
SAMUEL: Well I appreciate you keeping us in your prayers, Cole.
COLE: Yes, sir, you welcome. I reckon you headin' to church yourself.
SAMUEL: As soon as Mrs. Jones is done powdering her nose.

(COLE smiles.)

SAMUEL: *(Cont'd.)* I got a letter for you in the mail this week, Cole.
COLE: For me, sir?
SAMUEL: It's from someone named Hector. That's your brother's name, isn't it?
COLE: Yes, sir, it is.
SAMUEL: He still down the way at the Barker plantation?

COLE: Think so. Ain't seen him in a while.
SAMUEL: No, I guess you haven't. I haven't seen Mr. Barker in a while myself.
COLE: What that letter say, sir?
SAMUEL: I'm not sure, on account that I have yet to open it. I've heard rumors that you can read.

(COLE is quiet.)

SAMUEL: *(Cont'd.)* It's alright, Cole; I'm not here to punish you. But if you can in fact read, there's little point to my opening the letter, is there?
COLE: I reckon, sir.
SAMUEL: You reckon you can read, or you reckon there's little point?
COLE: Both, I guess.
SAMUEL: So you can read?
COLE: A little.
SAMUEL: My God, a slave that can read—slaves worshiping Christ. Times are a changing, Cole. I don't know if it's for the good or not, but they are most certainly changing.

(HE takes the letter out of his pocket and gives it to COLE.)

COLE: Mr. Jones?
SAMUEL: Yes, Cole?
COLE: Abner the one told you I can read?
SAMUEL: Don't you worry about that, it's the master's job to know his farm. Seeing as how our farm is so small, it makes my job mighty easy.
COLE: *(To himself.)* I bet it was Abner, mean ol' man.
SAMUEL: *(Smiles.)* You'll let me know if anything's the matter with your brother.
COLE: Yes, sir, thank you, sir. Mornin', Mr. Jones. *(COLE starts to leave.)*
SAMUEL: Cole?
COLE: *(Stops.)* Yes, sir?
SAMUEL: You'll be seeing Charles this morning, won't you?

End of Freeview

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