



LEXGO TO THE THEATER

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'In This Place ...': A piece of local history makes inspired drama

By Candace Chaney Contributing Theater Critic

In the dark glow of the black box theater at the Downtown Arts Center, a spray of white words flashes across a black TV screen.

"A forgotten man is still better remembered than his wife," it reads. And it is true. And it is why playwright Ain Gordon chose to write about Daphney Oldham, wife of the first free African-American to own a house in Lexington.

Commissioned by LexArts president Jim Clark to write a play inspired by Lexington history, Gordon has penned a powerful drama, resurrecting figures that history with a capital H has overlooked. *In This Place ...* is a gorgeously wrought one-woman show that employs 21st century multimedia technology to tell a 19th century story. The result cultivates a feeling of timelessness, a very human-scaled relatedness to the past and present of our own lives, and a more palpable connection to our individual inheritance of Lexington's history.

Little is known about the life of Daphney Oldham, except that she was born a slave and died a free woman. Her marriage to Samuel Oldham began while she was still a slave and he a free man. They lived separately for years until Samuel had saved enough money to purchase Daphney and their two sons and grant them freedom. Then he built the house at 245 S. Limestone (restored in 2006 by its current resident, Coleman Callaway III).

Michelle Hurst is the lone actor in this production, unless you count stage manager Ed Fitzgerald and assistant stage manager Lily Perlmutter, each positioned on stage, where they run technical equipment, occasionally move the sparse settings (often at Daphney's command), and sometimes even interact with Daphney. Another stage presence is the looming absence of Sam, whose out-of-focus image floats hauntingly on wide screens at the far perimeter of the theater.

The deconstructed feel of the staging provides a modern lens to view the past while offering multiple ways for the audience to enter the story, not the least of



David Perry | Staff
 Actress Michelle Hurst and director Ain Gordon put together a play about the first freed slave in Lexington to own land and build his own home. The house was rescued from decay. Photo by David Perry | Staff



David Perry | Staff
 Michelle Hurst rehearsed *In This Place ...*, a play about the Oldham House. Hurst is an experienced New York actress who had never been to Lexington before she began work on the play, in which she portrays a ghost trying to remember her life. Photo by David Perry | Staff



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which is Daphney's outright invitation to do so.

LexArts play

This is a production in which the audience overtly becomes a character. "You be me," Daphney says, "I'll be Sam." There is a moment where Daphney asks the audience to share their own memories, so that she can help to preserve them. This approach is potent without being sentimental and by the end of the evening, fosters a pronounced sense of emotional symbiosis between character and audience.

Hurst's portrayal of Daphney is so achingly realistic, so heartbreakingly tender and terrible and hopeful and sad and funny, that sniffs of muffled tears, rumbles of laughter, wide grins, and breath-holding silence often fills the theater. The scenes in which she described the birth of her first son and the death of her husband are two of the most sublime theatrical moments I've witnessed in a long time, maybe ever. That it is inspired by local history makes it even more meaningful.

The multimedia exhibits that accompany the production in the DAC lobby serve as further food for thought, particularly in light of current raging debates about the nature and scope of downtown development and the importance of historic preservation.

All in all, *In This Place ...* meets and far exceeds the parameters of its original commission. More than a two-hour theatrical signpost of Lexington history, it is a living marker that succeeds by focusing on the series of every day moments -- some dramatic, some not -- that eventually fill up a life and later, a memory. Daphney may be a ghost, but her life and her legacy are those of flesh, blood and bone that powerfully come to life on stage.

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