

REVIEW: Touching *Parchman Hour* Cometh (Guthrie)

by [Bev Wolfe](#) - October 19, 2016



The cast of the Guthrie Theater's The Parchman Hour. Photo by Dan Norman.

The Guthrie Theater's production of *The Parchman Hour* is a socially significant play detailing the outrageously brutal treatment of the [Freedom Riders](#) in 1961 as they rode in integrated Greyhound buses through the deep South. Patrick McGregor directs Mike Riley's play which powerfully portrays this chapter of in our history and infusing it with fresh renditions of slave spirituals and folk songs.

The setting of the story is Mississippi at the beginning of the civil rights era. The Freedom Riders, young people determined to challenge Jim Crow segregation, need protection from angry mobs that threaten them with violence at every southern bus station at which they stop. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, weighing personal concerns about the next Presidential election, refuses to call in federal troops to protect the riders. Instead, Kennedy effectively betrays them by reaching a deal with local police to have the riders arrested – ostensibly for their own safety – but then transported to the notorious Parchman prison where they were held for at least a month, enduring brutality and the possibility of being killed.

The story of the horrors the riders faced during their stay at Parchman is told through a satirical demonstration presented every night in hallways and prison cells as they continued their protest. They sang songs and imitated TV variety comedy shows to tell the tales of beatings and other abuse. Among the better known historical personalities in the group are James Farmer, who at that time was President of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and is known as one of the Big Six of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. As the Farmer character explains in the play, he did not originally plan to ride to Mississippi but when Martin Luther King declined to go with the riders, he became a hero because he was “cornered” by the riders who were counting on him. John Lewis, who is currently a senior member of Congress but in the 1960s was the leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was another of the Big Six civil rights leaders at that prison. Showing that old habits die hard, [Lewis recently led a sit down protest in](#)

[Congress this past June over gun control.](#) The final well known rider at Parchman was Stokely Carmichael who went on to succeed Lewis as President of SNCC and later became involved with the Black Panthers and the Pan African movement.

Some of the best dialogue in the show is the philosophical discourse between Lewis (Jared Joseph) and Carmichael (Kory LaQuess Pullam). Lewis embraces the non-violent protest strategies of both Dr. King and Gandhi, while Carmichael espouses beliefs more align with Malcolm X. Farmer (Kevin R. Free) often interjects to referee the disagreements. Much of the play's material can be found in the third episode of the PBS documentary series [Eye on the Prize](#), entitled "Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-1961)." But the variety show aspect of the play infuses these events with satire and music raising the storytelling to a greater level. The jazz rendition of the folk song "If I had a Hammer" is extremely powerful and is the best rendition of that folk standard that I have ever heard. [Noble Prize winner Bob Dylan's](#) protest song "The Times They are a-Changin'" is turned into a ballad which soars at the end of the show. Director McGregor has assembled a very talented ensemble with each actor taking on various roles including roles of different genders and races. Zonya Love's spirituals are amazing each time she sings. Other performers including Cat Brindisi and Stephen Conrad Moore also provide some touching musical moments in the play.



Zonya Love (Actor 5- Pearl / L.Collins / Jimmy McDonald / Jessie Harris) in *The Parchman Hour*. Photo by Dan Norman.

Scenic Designer Clint Ramos has provided a stark white two level stage which works well for projecting the names and images of the real riders. Lighting Designer Jiyoun Chang masterfully segues from stiff institutional lighting to a more intimate stage lighting when necessary.

The show does run a little too long, approximately two hours and twenty minutes with intermission. Trimming about 15 minutes from the show would help keep it more focused. But the production shows a part of our history that is both shameful and hopeful. It is one of those plays that should be seen by all.



The cast of the Guthrie Theater's *The Parchman Hour*. Photo by Dan Norman.

The *Parchman Hour* plays through November 6 at the Guthrie Theater's McGuire Proscenium Stage.