



**HISTORICAL HODGEPODGE:** (left to right) Robert Stanton, Arnie Burton, Brian Reddy, Reg Rogers, Mos, Jeffrey Wright in John Guare's sprawling epic, *A Free Man of Color*. Photo: T. Charles Erickson

## *Theater Review*

# Unfocused & intriguing *A Free Man of Color* is many plays in one

*A Free Man of Color*

Written by John Guare

Directed by George C. Wolfe

Vivian Beaumont Theatre

150 West 65th Street

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By Scott Harrah

There are so many stories, subplots and characters in John Guare's ambitious but seriously flawed *A Free Man of Color* that it seems like several plays rolled into one sprawling, historical epic hodgepodge. Had playwright Mr. Guare (author the classic *Six Degrees of Separation*) focused solely on one story, the play would not be all over the place, both literally and figuratively—from 1801 colonial New Orleans to Haiti and France under Napoleon's imperialist, tyrannical rule. One gets the feeling that Mr. Guare believed he was writing his magnum opus—a sort of farcical account of slavery in the New World in the vein of Voltaire, but the result is more of a colorful, history-packed mess with so many ideas that ultimately confuse audiences.

The cast members (all 32 of them, playing 40 different roles) are less characters than caricatures, adorned in Ann Hould-Ward's gorgeously florid period costumes. And for some odd reason, there are silly references to modern times in which characters spout inane dialogue that makes references to the 20th and 21st century. For example, Napoleon (Triney Sandoval), when speaking about the blood-soaked British Empire, delivers gibberish about hating Mick Jagger and other British icons of contemporary Anglophone culture in an attempt to add unnecessary humor.

Jeffrey Wright is often superb as Jacques Cornet, a freed, wealthy New Orleans slave of mixed race—his father was white; his mother, black—who is famous for being a womanizer. There are many juvenile references to his gigantic male endowment that is renowned throughout the colonial New World to countless bodice-clad aristocratic women and the courtesans and common prostitutes of El Norte, as the Big Easy was known when it was under royal Castilian rule and the northernmost point in Spanish Empire. Regardless, Mr. Wright hams it up in all the right places and is curiously arch, and he commands the stage at all times with his effervescent

presence and animated delivery of Guare's scattershot dialogue.

Anyone familiar with multicultural New Orleans in colonial times knows that freed slaves often had black slaves of their own, and Cornet's slave, Cupidon Murmur (Mos), is loyal to him for most of the story. The story of freed slaves in New Orleans circa 1801 would certainly have adequate material for an epic play, so it is perplexing why John Guare felt the need to overload *A Free Man of Color* for endless subplots. Perhaps Mr. Guare and director George C. Wolfe should have kept the proverb "less is more" in mind when revising the story.

There are many great performances here, from the venerable John McMartin as Thomas Jefferson to Paul Dano as Merriwether Lewis as his secretary and later, an explorer of the vast frontier of the unexplored western half of the North American continent. However, despite fine acting from everyone from Reg Rogers as Cornet's half-brother, Zeus-Marie Pincepousse, to Mos in a dual role as Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture, there is just too much going on here, and half-baked, ill-conceived dramatic exposition to be truly effective.

*A Free Man of Color* has a lot to say about slavery, manifest destiny, issues of race and class in colonial America, but John Guare tries to pack centuries of history into just under three hours. The myriad ideas and time-traveling narrative might have worked in a historical novel or even a blockbuster Hollywood film or TV miniseries, but it is virtually impossible to cover so many eras and characters in a solitary stage play. Perhaps *A Free Man of Color* might have been more palatable if it had been written as a theatrical series of several plays, like Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*, but as is, it is just one massive, interesting yet cumbersome trudge through the history books.

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