

Theater Review: 'Freeman' at Chicago's Physical Theater Festival is Must See Expressive Truth

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 7, 2019 - 10:31am

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CHICAGO – We are a sick society, consumed with fear. But the greatest art comes out of that fear, and the Strictly Arts Company – visiting from Britain – assesses the sum of our phobias regarding race relations in “Freeman,” now at the Physical Theater Festival in Chicago. There are two more performances of this must-see expression, Friday, June 7th, and Saturday, June 8th, 2019, at Stage 773 in Chicago's Belmont theater district. [Click here](#) [22] for more details and tickets.



Play Rating: **5.0/5.0**

In the 1840s, 16-year-old William Freeman was a “free man” African American in upstate New York, where he was accused of stealing a horse (he was actually a stable attendant, and was mistook for somebody else). He was sentenced to five years in Auburn prison, where he was beaten into a mental stupor. When released, he went on a murderous rampage, killing a wealthy farmer and his family. At his trial, he was the first man in American History to plead the insanity defense, and the case became a precedent for race and mental health, as a broken man challenged a broken justice system.



Which Way is Justice? 'Freeman' at the 6th Physical Theater Festival Chicago
Photo credit: PhysicalFestival.com

The Strictly Arts company – comprised of three men and two women – interpret the story through movement and character study, creating a vivid picture of the events surrounding Freeman, as well as the systematic sickness and fear that continues in American society involving law enforcement harassment/killings of African Americans, including the high-profile case of Sandra Bland, and the less known situations involving Sarah Reed, Michael Bailey and David Oluwale. The result is crushingly emotional and a necessary indictment of our race relation sins. The patriarchal white supremacy of “western civilization” destroyed so many lives, and continues to do so. The work asks, “WHY?”

There are six stories in all, and the company uses choreography, spoken dialogue (with each player doing multiple characters), song, shadow puppetry (vividly creative) and stage pictures (including an incredible depiction of a horse using only their bodies). It is also raucous, celebratory (there is a scene using rock music that makes you want to get up and dance) and poignant. This is theater as it's meant to be ... a bare stage, committed interpreters, and a presentation that never panders and hits its target message square between the eyes.



'Freeman' at the 6th Physical Theater Festival Chicago
Photo credit: PhysicalFestival.com

The Physical Theater Festival Chicago seeks to program work that uses cutting-edge, on-the-pulse theatrical forms that are responding to the moment using contemporary notions of theater, which elevates the perceptible aspects of its stories. This style of theater is occupied with the creation of visual atmospheres and images as much as verbal text. The Festival also seeks to present work that pursues storytelling through primarily physical means, whose aim is to create original stories which start and end with the body as the foundational textual source.

“Freeman” is a visceral, deep-rooted example of theater to change a point of view, to give voice to the voiceless, and finally demanding justice from a society that keeps feeding its sickness with an overdose of constant suspicion and collective mental illness.

The 6th Physical Theater Festival Chicago takes place through Sunday, June 9th, 2019, primarily at Stage 773, 1225 West Belmont Avenue, Chicago. For details about the fest, [click here](#). [23] For a HollywoodChicago.com interview with the co-founder and co-artistic director of the fest, Alice Da Cunha, [click here](#). [24]



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