

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Production Draft

By James Harker

KAYLEIGH: White, 18

OXFORD: Black, 30s

*The following play is explicitly designed to be heard at the Slavery Memorial,
St George's Quay, Lancaster.*

KAYLEIGH: Question:

What is the scarcest, most valuable commodity in the universe?

Not money.

That's for sure.

Not cotton, not rum, not mahogany.

Not even people.

OXFORD: The trick is to smile.

KAYLEIGH: It's dignity.

OXFORD: Wide pickaninny smile.

Teeth glistening, lips pursed

Permanent 'yes sir' smile.

KAYLEIGH: Dignity.

OXFORD: And you do as they say.

KAYLEIGH: Basic human dignity.

OXFORD: Always as they say.

KAYLEIGH: 'Cause without money you're powerless
But without dignity ...

OXFORD: And underneath ...

KAYLEIGH: Without dignity ...

OXFORD: Underneath: you hate them.

Beat.

KAYLEIGH: Look: I'm freezing my tits off here.
Under this 'memorial'
This rain.
Those ugly racks of plastic, [of] badly glued-on tiles.
That list of names, etched down the side.
Unfinished.
Like it could go on and on forever.
'Cause that's they think: isn't it.
That *all* of us are guilty: our people, *white* people.
I mean: not sensitive, haluomi-eating middle class white people like them
But, you know ... us.

The scum

The nothing

The unreconstructed, uneducated, flag-waving reprobates

OXFORD: I saw him beat a man to death.

KAYLEIGH: *We're* guilty.

OXFORD: Watched him, with his bare hands.

Red blood on white cotton, red blood on the starched sleeves of his shirt.

I was four, maybe five.

KAYLEIGH: I was here, in 2008?

The speeches ... the ceremony as they unveiled this thing.

TV.

Papers.

Black faces up from London.

Tears in everyone's eyes.

OXFORD: Even then I smiled.

Even then I'd learnt.

Hating ...

Waiting ...

Him:

Our master.

John Patrick Henderson.

John. Patrick. Henderson

Him and the others like him.

KAYLEIGH: You should've heard them on the radio.

Talk of "Collective guilt"

"Collective shame"

"Reparations."

Like they're not *glad* to live in this country over some *field* in Sierra Leone with red dirt and malaria and ... and ...

OXFORD: They called it an 'Empire.'

400 million people, one quarter of the planet's surface.

And all I've ever seen is one cotton field.

KAYLEIGH: It's not that I'm a racist.

Never been a racist, but ...

OXFORD: We clung to the rumours.

Changes in the 'mother country'

Emancipation movement building in force.

KAYLEIGH: My dad, he *fought* for this country.

Falklands, 1982.

Two months on that rain-drenched, blood-soaked rock.

OXFORD: And then you could feel it, see it ...

Their fear, their unease.

Worry on the faces of the overseers,

Guns gripped tighter in their hands.

KAYLEIGH: He killed a man, out there.

Under orders.

A boy really.

Boy soldier.

OXFORD: Soon they *couldn't* suppress it: the news from England.

The Abolition Bill.

[News] spreading like floodwater over the island.

Feels like the whole colony's packed into Spanish Town that Wednesday morning.

The Governor's there himself.

Looming over the makeshift pulpit.

Shouting like a man possessed.

"Negroes of Jamaica," he cries. "You are free.

"The people of England have been good.

"*But*, to prove you are deserving of this goodness, you must labour diligently.

"From this day you will no longer be slaves ...

"You will be apprenticed to your former owners in order to earn your freedom

"Work hard, work well ... or you will surely render yourself liable to punishment.

And that was it.

Verbatim.

One form of bondage for another.

KAYLEIGH: It doesn't last long: the hero's welcome.

Soon he was back to the factories, back drinking.

Broken.

The flour mill, the lino works: till that closed too.

He finished with the Hendersons.

Big abattoir, over near Morecombe.

You've heard of them: the Hendersons.

Own everything round here.

And it's no secret why.

I watched what they did to him:

Low pay.

No rights.

No future.

I watched as the last buildings closed.

Business turned to rubble while the Hendersons stayed rich, untouchable, powerful.

Promises broken, re-broken.

Pension fund stripped, gone forever.

Out of work he was worse:

Useless.

Worse than useless.

One morning I found him collapsed

There in the kitchen.

Shit pooled around his ankles.

It wasn't long after that that he went.

Beat.

But I'll tell you one thing.

OXFORD: We built this Empire.

KAYLEIGH: We built this empire.

Not slaves.

OXFORD: Not whites.

KAYLEIGH: Not money.

Not the Hendersons.

OXFORD: We built this Empire.

Generation after generation.

KAYLEIGH: Dockers, mill workers, factorymen, soldiers.
My father, his father.

Beat.

OXFORD: The slavers are compensated, of course.
£20,000 for the Hendersons.
Millions for others.

KAYLEIGH: And us ...

OXFORD: We got nothing.

KAYLEIGH: Just one form of bondage for another.

Pause.

OXFORD: So I walk back to the plantation.

KAYLEIGH: [The] carlights shine in the darkness.

OXFORD: Smile gone I swear.

KAYLEIGH: Mercedes slows to a stop, here by the dock.

OXFORD: And I see him now.

KAYLEIGH: Not as tall as his father but unmistakable:
Same greasy yellow hair, same waxy double chin.

OXFORD: Henderson.

KAYLEIGH: Henderson.
And he waves.

OXFORD: Nods.

KAYLEIGH: Climbing out towards me.
Though I haven't made an effort.
Though I look nothing like my Tinder profile.

OXFORD: He sticks out his hand: a mockery of equality.

KAYLEIGH: He likes us, I've heard.
Chavs.
Young ones.
Low rent types.

OXFORD: And for once that buried hatred rises.

KAYLEIGH: And I can't say how long it lasts.

OXFORD: Up, through my craw.

My mind.

My body.

Sheer, murderous hatred.

KAYLEIGH: Minutes.

Seconds.

OXFORD: My palms flex into fists.

Hands made strong from lifetimes of sharecropping.

KAYLEIGH: I plunge the knife into him.

OXFORD: I know I'm going to kill him.

KAYLEIGH: Again.

Again.

Sink it.

Sink it into his stomach, his chest.

Blood, gristle on my hands.

He gurgles

Whinges.

Babylike.

[!] keep plunging.

OXFORD: But I don't.

Don't rip his lungs from his chest.

Don't dash his head on the steps.

Don't move, don't speak.

Just smile.

KAYLEIGH: And I step back.

OXFORD: Silently.

KAYLEIGH: Let the knife slip into the Lune.

OXFORD: Take his hand: wet flesh on mine.

KAYLEIGH: Scoop his wallet and his phone from the pavement.

OXFORD: And for once he smiles back.

John Patrick Henderson.

Stood there, grinning.

“Welcome to freedom” he says.

“You always were my favourite nigger.”

KAYLIEGH: You know: I’ve been thinking.

That word: nigger.

The word we’re taught to fear and despise.

The one you’d rather empty your bowels in the middle of Sainsburys than utter
in 50 metres of polite company.

It isn’t a bad word.

It’s a good one.

[The] only one that truly captures the spat on, trampled dignity of a people
lower than human, lower than animal.

And it should make you bristle

Should make your stomach grind with guilt as you hear it, as you speak it.

It hurts because it’s true.

This town so fat on slavery, so full of foodbanks.

The Ridge

The Marsh.

Ryelands: where white, British families can’t even afford cars.

That word is ours as well.

Kicked down.

Shat on.

Locked out.

And reparations.

OXFORD: Reparations.

KAYLEIGH: Reparations ...

We've barely even started.

END