A telling tradition

In studying the folk tales that were handed down by my people in bondage to teach and comfort, I learned vital lessons about the people themselves. And that led me to create 'Flight,' set on a plantation in 1858.

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I come from storytellers. My grandfather, the best storyteller in the family, often taught his 22 grandchildren lessons through stories.

Just before I left home for college, Granddaddy told me about a college girl who never drank or did drugs. He said, "She was a good church girl, just like you, Charlayne. One night she went to a party with some of her friends. There was dancin' in some rooms and people was watching a movie in the other. The college girl preferred to dance. While she was on the dance floor, somebody offered her a can of soda. Oh, she drank it down right away. Next thing she remembers was wakin' up in her dorm room. It was the next day!

"Now, the very next weekend, the college girl was invited to another party. Once again some people was dancin' and others was watchin' a movie. When she peeked into the dark room, this time she saw herself right up there on the screen with the star of the football team. And I don't have to tell ya, they was doing a whole lot more than dancin'."

Granddaddy never had to tell me to "be careful, don't trust everybody, and stay away from drugs." I got it from the story.

Growing up with storytelling came in handy when the Center Theatre Group commissioned me to write my first multicharacter play. Until then I'd only written solo work for myself. I decided to adapt folk tales, from Africa and the American South, for the stage. I read hundreds of other folk tales. I chose my favorites, wrote my adaptations and there it was -- folklore project completed!

But my real journey had just begun. I read narratives of the enslaved Africans brought to America -- oral histories of life in bondage from the mouths of the very people who experienced it.

Only then did I begin to understand the evolution of storytelling in our culture. I learned that as soon as the Africans arrived, their languages and religions were outlawed. They were not allowed to read or write under penalty of death.

In this new land, there was a great need for folk tales. Those living in bondage had no sewing circles, no Bible study and no debutante gatherings to help them endure their everyday trials and tribulations.

Consequently, storytelling was the HBO, the "Masterpiece Theatre," of the day. The special effects were the storyteller's gift of gab, movement and music. Because of the prohibitions, the storyteller cleverly disguised culture and history within the stories.

My people used these tales to teach, to comfort those in mourning, to celebrate births and weddings and to provide strength and hope in times of tragedy and loss. These tales were passed from generation to generation.

As I adapted the folk tales and narratives, the spirit and the humanity of my people were revealed to me. The man who loved his wife so, he carved a wedding ring for her out of a red button. The single mom so brave she fought an elephant to save her children and their home. The wise man who outsmarted the bear and found his freedom. The gardener who cultivated her memory and whose great memory saved her life.

As a result, I created "Flight," focusing not only on the tales but also on the people who told them. I set my evening of storytelling in 1858, on a plantation 20 miles outside of Savannah, Ga. And what makes this night different from all the rest? Sadie, a wife and mother, got sold.

What a commotion this choice caused! "You can't use the 'S' word! Not slavery! Don't go there! Just adapt the folk tales and have a band of actors tell them. Slavery is too tough on children...."

The subject of slavery in America makes many people, black and white, uncomfortable. Whites don't want to be blamed for events that took place hundreds of years ago; blacks are tired of the ridiculous depictions of enslaved men and women as ignorant, powerless victims who like to sing and dance.

I have a friend who was asked to audition for a role in a film. "No way will I ever play a slave," he said. "Charlayne, they actually show this slave being whipped in public. I won't play a slave."

I begged him. "Please. For God's sake don't play a slave. Play the human being. Dig deep and find the man. Do your research. These people were survivors. If they weren't, you and I wouldn't be here having this conversation today."

My friend refused to audition, but another actor, Denzel Washington, went on to brilliantly breathe life into that very human being and won an Oscar for "Glory."
Knowledge makes us stronger

Our stories must be told. We have an obligation to our forefathers and mothers, as well as to our future. We must search for the truth, all of it -- the good and the bad -- because knowledge of our past can only empower us.

Other cultures, such as the Roma (Gypsies), the Inuit (Eskimos) and the Jews, use storytelling to empower their people. In fact, the Jews simply refuse to forget. Jewish tradition embraces their struggles as well as their victories. As a result, many Jews develop a sense of pride in themselves and their culture from an early age.

A few weeks ago, I flew to Chicago for my uncle's funeral. When I arrived at the house, I stood on the front porch listening to the symphony of loud voices inside. Nobody could hear the doorbell ring, so I opened the door and stepped into a room filled with laughter that nearly knocked me back out into the cold Chicago night. James Jones had died, yet the night before the funeral his family and friends were sitting around the dining room table telling stories -- stories that lifted them out of their grief and celebrated a life.

I encourage our young people to discover our history and embrace our culture -- the good and the bad -- because all of it inspires and strengthens. Whoever said, "Whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger" was right. We must witness and tell the stories of our people.

We must remember who we are and refuse to forget our survivors of bondage. Because they lived, we live.

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Freedom `Flight': an excerpt

Ezra: There was these two best friends -- Achilles and Thomas. When the Elders was teaching them everything they knew about how to live in the wild, Achilles listened and learned. But Thomas couldn't keep his mind set on anything other than food.

A time came when Achilles wanted to make a run for the north, to freedom. 'Course he asked Thomas to come with him. They both knew it would be a very hard journey. So they made a promise to each other, swearin'

Ezra/Oh Beah: To stick together and help each other no matter what.

Ezra: 'Cause that's what friends do.

Now, Achilles had a plan. He'd use all the wisdom of the Elders.

The two friends took off in the middle of the night. But first, they rubbed hot peppers on the bottoms of their feet. Why?

Ezra/Oh Beah: To throw the hounds off their trail.

Ezra: They traveled at night. Why?

Ezra/Oh Beah: So the paddyrollers couldn't see them.

Ezra: And whenever they heard those hounds hollering, that's when they'd come out and run along the river. After a few days, Thomas got so powerful hungry he was ready to give hisself up -- just to get some real food.

Once again, Achilles came up with a plan. He killed some swamp rabbits and Thomas caught a couple of fish. Then they made a big fire and went off about half a mile down the path. They hid in the thickets while they waited for the fire to burn down to coals. Why?

Ezra/Oh Beah: Just in case someone saw the fire.

Ezra: When they saw the path was clear, then they went back and bakes them some fish and rabbit. Oh boy! They gobbled it down in a hurry and went on their way towards freedom.

What they didn't eat, Achilles left behind. Just like the Elders told them. Don't want the scent of the meat on you, don't you know.

By and by they found themselves in a dark forest. Sure enough, they didn't get halfway through, when this

All: Big old, ugly, brown bear

Ezra: Smelled that food Thomas had sneaked in his cap.

That bear jumped out of the bushes and charged them both. Them two friends was scared to death! I tell you, Thomas found the nearest tree and scurried up to the top branches, leaving Achilles down on the ground to face the bear alone.

Oooh! Achilles had to use his wits. He remembered what the Elders taught him:

All: "Bears don't eat no dead people."
Ezra: So Achilles, he lay down on the ground, held his breath, closed his eyes and played like he was dead. This

All: Ugly, smelly, big-headed bear

Ezra: Walked over to him real slow, sniffing as he went. Took his snout ... turned Achilles over ... trying to find out if he was breathing. But Achilles

All: Held his breath ... for the longest time.

Ezra: After a while, that bear went off a little ways and hunkered down so he could watch the man. See if he was just playing 'possum. Then he come back, smelled him again. And this time, looked at him, real close. Finally, the bear said,

All: "That man is dead."

Ezra: Turned up his nose and went off in the woods just like he came.

All this time, Thomas just stayed squinched up in that tree ... watching. He didn't do nothin'. He coulda made some noise to scare the bear off. He coulda threwed down some fruit to annoy that bear. Thomas didn't do nothin' to help his best friend.

Even when Thomas could see the bear was gone for sure, he still didn't come down. Instead, he hollered down: "Say! Achilles! What you and that bear been talking about? Him and you seemed like you was having a close ... conversation."

Achilles hollered back, "That bear been telling me ... never trust nobody who calls himself a friend ... and who runs as soon as trouble comes."

[Beat]

And with that, Achilles took off on his own. He had outsmarted the paddyrollers, outsmarted the dogs and outsmarted the bear. And I know he found his freedom.

Thomas didn't have no choice but to go on back to the plantation and take his punishment.

* "Flight"

Where: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City

When: Opens 5 p.m. Jan. 22. Regular schedule: 2 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Also 7:30 p.m. Feb. 4 and Feb. 8-11, 5 p.m. Feb. 6, 2 p.m. Feb. 9-10

Ends: Feb. 13

Price: $10 to $30

Contact: (213) 628-2772 or www.KirkDouglasTheatre.org

* "Flight"

Actress and playwright Charlayne Woodard's other works include "In Real Life" and "Neat."