

YO FREDERICK!

**(A rap rendition on the boyhood, early life
and hard times of Frederick Douglass)**

A play by Gus Edwards

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Set

This play is written to be performed on a relatively empty stage with perhaps a few platforms here and there.

Somewhere on stage there should be a chair. Something upright and formal.

Cast

The cast size for this show can vary in number from 10 and up, with various cast members assuming the various roles as they show up in the story.

All cast members play multiple parts except for the actor playing Frederick.

Racially, the play can be performed by a mixed or all African American cast. And the gender breakdown should be 4 women, 6 men if it's a cast of 10, and proportionately so if the cast is larger. If it's an all African American cast then the actors playing the Anglo roles of Covey and others should wear some kind of minimal masks to indicate their race.

The age of the cast can be anywhere from mid and upper teens to late twenties.

Style and Presentation

The entire play should be performed in a presentational style with all cast members on stage all the time either acting out individual roles or observing what's going on and serving as narrators or chorus.

Narration

Every place in the script where it says: Narrator – should be spoken by a different member of the cast. When the designation is Chorus – then everyone speaks in unison.

Movement and Rhythm

The play is written to be done to a series of rap rhythms accompanied by some hip hop movement. And it is left up to each individual company to come up with their own rhythmical beats and movements.

Costumes

In a show like this, costumes are negligible. Anything youthful and contemporary will suffice.

Yo Frederick

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Entire Cast

Theatre performers that's who we be
And we do our plays historically
We look at America past and present
And on that we base our theatrical event.
We pick out somebody who has done a great thing
And we put him on stage to talk or to sing
It's not always a guy, sometimes it's a she
Like Harriet Taubman, or Susan B. Anthony.
And for our troupe race don't mean a thing,
We'll do a show on Abe Lincoln, Sitting Bull or Martin
Luther King.
Today our show is about Frederick D.
Who helped to put an end to slavery.
So, sit back and relax while we show
What America was like more than a hundred years ago.
A hundred years ago . . . A hundred years ago.

Narrator

The year is 1817
The place is Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
And we begin the sound of what used to be called "An old
Negro spiritual."

(The entire cast begins humming – the kind that we used to hear in old movies that dealt with slavery or the Civil War.)

Lights Dim. *(Cast member steps forward or is lit by a spotlight.)*

Female

Public notice number 56.

Dear Sirs,

I am anxious to purchase a healthy Negro child *between the age of 10 and 13 for training in household duties and the like. I would prefer a girl with good coloring and no marks on her skin.

*(Another narrator begins to speak at the *.)*

Male

I'm looking for a black man of 19 to 28. He must be strong and muscular with a pleasant disposition. For such a person I will pay the * going rate. Not one penny more, not one penny less. After all, fair is fair.

*(Another chimes in at the *.)*

Female

The need is for two colored women who are healthy and strong, one to work in the house, and the other in the garden and field. Age is not important so long as they are healthy and capable of a good day's work. If you have any such persons for sale, please contact me at the above address.

Yours truly,
Mrs. D.W. Baxter

(The lights change as this person finishes speaking. At the same time the humming in the background fades out as well.)

Abruptly a rap beat is heard. It shatters the mood that the humming had established.

The Old American Tradition

Narrator

They was talking about slavery
A real bad condition
Which used to be a part of
The American tradition

Chorus

American tradition, American tradition!

Narrator

They would catch you, break you.
And put you in chains
Crush you under their boots like
You didn't have any brains.

Chorus

Tradition . . . tradition!

Narrator

It started in the old world, then moved on to the new
Where they built a whole economy on slave revenue.

Chorus

Slave revenue . . . slave revenue!

Narrator

They would catch them in Africa
And put them on a ship
Then beat them and starve them
For the whole trip.
Many slaves died coming across the sea
For them America meant hell, not the land of liberty.

Chorus

Land of Liberty, Land of Liberty, etc.

Narrator

Now when they reached the New World they were auctioned
on the block
Where people bought and sold them to increase their stock.
Capitalism was the name of the game
And where money was concerned,

Those folks knew no shame.

Chorus

No shame, no shame, etc.

Narrator

The father to this farm, the mother over there
 With the baby in the middle, didn't nobody care.
 A slave is a slave, you can take it from me
 All this was a part of American history.

Chorus

American history . . . American history.

(Spoken) "We hold these truths to be indivisible that all men
 are equal."

(Rapped) That's what was said, but when you shake it out,
 Slavery for the black man is what it was all about.

That's right, a slave was a slave,
 That was his condition
 And it all was a part
 Of the American tradition.

Chorus

(Echo) The American tradition
 The American tradition
 The American tradition
 - oh yeah.

Auctioneer

(At a podium – he raps his gavel)

Let's get it together
 Ain't got no time to waste
 Come gather round and get your slave purchased
 Now let's do it with haste.
 I got big ones, small ones,
 Fat ones and lean
 And all the other sizes
 That come in between.

A slave in the house will get you far.
 And the more slaves you have, the better off you are.
 This is the land of milk and honey,
 But ain't nothing pouring if you ain't got some money.

Just show me your cash
 And you can take your pick
 Don't just stand there staring
 Like you is some hick.
 Check them out close
 And see what you like
 Cause if you ain't spending money,
 You gonna have to take a hike.

See this one here, he is a good-looking feller
 You can work him in the fields or in your cellar.
 And this pretty one here, I don't have to tell you what she can
 do.

You got an imagination, so it's all up to you.
 And babies, babies, babies
 I got babies galore
 Bring em up anyway you like
 And they'll make you happy for sure.

Money talks. Ain't nothing for free
 But everything I sell, I guarantee.
 Give me your hand, I'll show you the way
 To get very rich in America today.

Chorus

Buy slaves! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!
 (Echo) Buy slaves, buy slaves, buy slaves.

[New Beat]

2 Narrators

Now outta this noise
 One slave had a son
 A boy she called Freddie
 Who would grow up to be the one
 To take on slavery
 And run it to the sea
 And finally make America
 A land of Liberty.

Chorus

Chorus: The land of Liberty – (Repeat 3 times)
(Sound of a baby crying is heard. A woman cradling an
imaginary baby crosses the stage and stops.)

Harriet

Frederick. That's what we're going to call you my little
darling. Frederick Augustus Baily. You ain't got no Papa,
but you got me and I loves you my little one. I loves you so
much.

Plantation Owner

Come along Harriet. You got no time for fooling with that
baby. You have work to do. Come along . . . come along.

Harriet

Yes Sir.

(She hurries away)

Narrator

Slavery was so rough that
You couldn't say no.
You had to go where they
Told you and you couldn't walk slow.

So, Harriet went one way

And her baby son another
To be looked after and
Took care of by his grandmother.

She couldn't see her son by day,
But she used to try
At night she'd slip away
To kiss and hug him on the sly.

Twelve miles it was
From one plantation to another
But that was nothing
To Harriet – his mother.

Harriet
(Speaking)

Freedom is a right that every man is born with. Don't matter how they treat you or try to beat you down, don't ever forget that my son. Freedom is a right. Not something that somebody can give you. Them that say they can stole the right from God. Don't ever forget that, you hear me. Don't ever forget that.

Frederick

No Mama, I won't

Narrator

The day he got the news

He was only seven.
They told him Mama had got sick
And passed on to heaven.
For the black man, the Negro, Tom
Or whatever else they would yell
Heaven had to be paradise
Cause life on Earth was hell.

(Change in mood as background humming is heard.)

Preacher

The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Whosoever
questions the will of the Lord will perish in the fires of
external damnation.

Entire Cast

Amen . . .

Narrator

Hers was a short life
Without much pleasure
But she had one fine
Son and that was her treasure.

He would grow up strong
And quick like his Mama wanted him to be.
Always asking questions about slavery.
But all he kept hearing

Was that his condition
Was an integral part of
The American tradition.

Chorus

(Repeat) The American tradition
The American tradition
The American tradition
- oh yeah!

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(Young Frederick Douglass comes forward.)

Frederick

I am only seven years old and I don't understand
Why one man has to be a slave to another man.

Man White

Because God meant it to be that way boy.

Frederick

My mama told me we was all made equally
And that there shouldn't be any such thing as slavery.

White Man

Your mama told you wrong boy.

Frederick

You calling my mama a liar?

(Raises his fists to fight)

White Man

Put down your hands boy, before I have your owner sell you away from here. You hear me? Now be a good boy and know your place in life.

(He exits)

Frederick

(Alone)

It can't be true, it can't be part of God's plan
For one man to be a slave to his fellow man.
I'm just a kid, but I know something's wrong
And I can't wait to grow up to be big and strong
So I can talk out against it all over the land
And try to make everybody I meet understand
That everyone is equal, everyone's the same
And that this thing called slavery is an American shame.

An American shame
 An American shame
 An American shame.

(Speaking) It's funny. It's only the grown ups who say
 slavery is right. Every white boy or girl my own age that I
 talk to say that everyone should be free.

(Some white kids enter.)

White Kids

They tell us because he's black that we should put him down
 That the only thing he's good for is to be a clown.
 But Freddy is our buddy, Freddy is our mate
 So why should we make him stand outside the gate?

All we want to do is play with him, Dad.
 Just because his skin is black that doesn't make him bad.
 He knows how to run, catch, play hide and go seek
 Still you want for us to treat him like a freak.
 But Freddy is no freak and you know it, too
 He's a human being just like me and you.
 Just like me and you
 Just like me and you
 Just like me and you.

Frederick

I don't know what to do, I don't want to be this way
 But slavery is my life and it's here I got to stay.

I seen a lot of things that make me feel bad
Like the way they treat grown up blacks
That really is sad.

Give you an example of what I'm talking about.