

THEATER REVIEW: ‘A Free Man of Color’ puts revolutionary chaos into focus at Salem State

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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John Guare must have read up on chaos theory. The notion that apparently random actions eventually come to coherence may not specifically lie at the root of Guare’s “A Free Man of Color.” But while the versatile players in the Salem State University theater department explored Guare’s 2010 historic farce Friday evening at the Sophia Gordon Center, the feeling grew that the madcap work would eventually make sense.

If you go...

WHAT: “A Free Man of Color”

WHERE: Sophia Gordon Center, 356 Lafayette St., Salem State University

WHEN: through April 29. Shows are Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m.

TICKETS: \$20. \$15 seniors/students. Under 18 free. Salem residents free on Friday, April 27. Visit www.salemstatetickets.com or call 978-542-6365.

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Ostensibly this haphazard spectacle details the adventures of Jacques Cornet. He's the Free Man of the title, a playwright himself, and the focus of the antics taking place in New Orleans around 1800. It's a liberated city, an amalgam of blacks, whites, and in-betweens, full of sexual libertines and pleasure seekers.

There is no simple way to describe the action. The playing strays off to Washington, Paris and Santa Domingue (Haiti), and to the political struggles featuring Napoleon, Jefferson and Toussaint L'Ouverture. Revolutions — French, American and Haitian — swirl around.

But the historical is only a cursory part of the theatrical exposition. Cornet's antics — his sexual prowess has the ladies swooning and the cuckolded men furious — along with his wealth, actually drive the play along.

For the longest time it's a drive through the wilderness. At least for the first two-and-a-half hours, it's impossible to discern a sense of direction in "Free Man." But the ride is so curious, these players so skilled, director Peter Sampieri's concept so compelling, and the choreography, set, costuming and lights so inspiring, that it doesn't really matter.

Cornet (danced, sung and acted with aplomb by Jeomil Tovar) has it made. A mixed-race former slave who has bought his freedom, he has his own slave (Cupidon Murmur, played by the fabulously resourceful Hubens Cius), lots of money, and a passion for clothes, maps and his neighbors' wives.

He lives out his pleasures while rapid-fire, brain-numbing historical asides (with segues narrated by Dr. Toubib, calmly played by Lensey Alerte) tell the complicated story of New Orleans, caught in a switcheroo among the various interests of America, Spain and France. There's lots of details about the Louisiana Purchase, and the shabby treatment of wretched Santa Domingue, all lending a sense that Cornet's glory days in New Orleans are about to come to an end.

They do, and that ending finally delivers a message, but the chaos does not resolve itself in a way anyone would expect.

Sampieri's ideas, and the high energy he consistently gets from his players, made this carnival of action come together. Both the dance choreography (James Morrow) and the fight choreography (Normand Beauregard) were rousing and taut — the culminating sword-fights (usually painfully amateurish to witness) were an extended tour-de-force.

The dance scenes filled the role of Greek chorus, somewhat, stepping back from the discord to give warnings or add insights. The dance music mashed techno/house/beat with Lully/Rameau/Couperin without hesitation, the dancers doing the same, in a marvelous flurry of movement and sound.

Multiple players offered multiple skilled performances. Nikos Koutsogiannis breathed beautiful life into his role as Cornet's half-brother, Zeus-Marie Pincepousse (Guare's character names are a thing of beauty). Margaret Sweeney's Dona Polissena found hilarious counterpoint between scientific exploration and sexual arousal. Schanaya Barrows' several characters were upstaged only by her dancing skills. Christopher Raul Vega (Intendante Morales), Seth Olsen (Meriwether Lewis), Asher Greenwood Harris (Thomas Jefferson), Claudia Cruz (Margery Jolicoeur) — it's a long list of stellar, invested characterizations that make the craziness of "A Free Man of Color" a delight to experience.

"A Free Man of Color" runs through April 29 at the Sophia Gordon Center, 356 Lafayette St., Salem State University. For tickets and information visit www.salemstatetickets.com or call 978-542-6365.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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