

Lady
of
Parkham
Preface

By David Edgecombe

For Pam and Percy Arthurton

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I was handed the story of *Lady of Parham* in November 2012 at dinner in Antigua with my dear friends Pam and Percy Arthurton. Pam was intrigued by a local legend of a ghost who haunts the village of Parham and cannot go to her final resting place until she tells someone where she hid the treasure she stole and buried four centuries ago.

Pam had done considerable research on the legend, using resources from the Museum of Antigua and Barbuda and the Historic Society. I pored over the four typewritten pages of notes she gave me that consisted mainly of eye-witness reports from persons who over the centuries claimed to have encountered the ghost. While these were interesting, I was more intrigued by the human elements of the story: man's ceaseless fascination with easy treasure, the greed for gold which influences behavior even after death, and the ghosts that haunt every generation.

The other compelling reason for writing the play was Pam's interest in it as a commercial venture. I have implicit confidence in her business acumen and know how badly Caribbean theatre suffers from not having the sustained interest of good entrepreneurs. She thought a play about the legend of Parham could make great dinner theatre. I thought a musical would make the best dinner theatre. However, since I know little about dinner theatre or musicals—although I've toyed with writing a musical for years—I decided to work in the medium I know best and set out to write a play. Musicals and dinners would follow.

At the time Pam introduced the legend to me, I was still working on cleaning up my stage adaptation of the short story *Kill the Rabbits* by Tiffany Yanique that premiered at the University of the Virgin Islands in Spring 2012, and producing the movie *Timeless*, written and directed by Edward LaBorde, Jr., that, at the time of writing, is still in production. I couldn't focus on *Lady of Parham*, but she stayed on my back burner and little by little ideas germinated around the story and how to tell it. These ideas became more refined following my August 2013 visit to the village of Parham in Antigua.

I went to the house where Sarah Rumsey and her husband Patrick lived in the late 17th Century before Sarah became *the ghost*. It was in that house that she murdered Thomas Flynn, her husband's uncle, for the oak chest of gold and silver he brought with him from Ireland. It is said she buried the treasure at or in the surroundings of a lodge about 300 yards from the house, but there was no trace of this lodge. The current occupant of the Rumsey plantation house knew of the ghost, but had never seen her. He told me that he hoped she would visit him soon and point him to some of the gold as he happened to be a bit 'broke' at that time.

I came across an old school building that had been transformed into a community center. It would later influence the setting of the play. I met many people in Antigua and the Virgin Islands who were familiar with the story. The younger ones say they vaguely remember hearing about it from their parents and grand parents. One told me Parham is the obeah capital of Antigua although others argue the title more accurately belongs to Potters. I found the folklore of Parham fascinating and left convinced that it was a great setting for a ghost story.

From my research, I learned there are at least two other plays in existence about the ghost of Parham. One I could find no information on. The other is by the playwright Oliver Flax, who I never met but whose name I remember well as the author of *The Legend of Prince Klaas*, the play Antigua took to the first ever CARIFESTA in Guyana in 1972. I learned with regret of his passing in 2013 in Trinidad where he had lived for several years. I have not yet been able to secure any copies of his plays.

I knew from the beginning I couldn't just write another ghost story—whatever that is. I wanted to dramatize the interplay between the past and present, juxtaposing the problems and challenges of modern day persons against those of people in the past, all in the context of the Parham legend. The cast had to be small, so each actor would need to play multiple characters. It was also important that the production adapt

a minimalist style. A simple set with simple props and simple costume changes was all the actors would get to move from the 21st to the 17th century and back. A change of accent and attitude would convert a black Antiguan into a white European. A brief walk across the stage would take the audience 400 years into the past. It would be an actors' piece that would take full advantage of theatre's greatest attribute—the willingness of its audience to suspend disbelief.

A year passed. I had some ideas and had made a few notes but not one line of the play had been written. On December 20 I found myself stuck at the Frenchtown Deli, St. Thomas. The niece of a friend came into the deli and we struck up a conversation in which I told her about the play. Moments after she left her aunt strolled in and wanted to hear about the play as well. In telling them, most of the remaining knotty problems with characters and plot straightened themselves out to the point where I knew it was time to begin writing.

I called a friend and asked if she could record me telling her the play. She agreed and sent me a transcript of the recording so quickly it was dazzling. I began writing early the morning of December 21 and typed "The End" on January 2, 2014. I always try to write my first drafts quickly but this was the fastest I had ever done one. Then came the long process of rewriting and editing that continued through rehearsal to the world premier at the UVI Little Theatre on April 4, to the first staging of the full play in August and to its performance at the 6th Nature Island Literary Festival (NILF) in Dominica on August 9th.

The play calls for just five actors: Tulip, Justin, Sauna, Kyle, and Mabel, but, casting proved a monumental task.

Tulip is a central member of the group that meets at the old school house. I chose the name Tulip because all the Tulips I know are from Antigua and I liked using a name I thought of as typically Antiguan. Tulip also plays Sarah, the Lady of Parham.

Justin, her live-in boyfriend, also plays Patrick, Sarah's husband. In a way Justin is Patrick's second chance to get things right, to get and keep a good woman who can possibly save him from his greatest fear—becoming a 'nobody'.

Sauna, Tulip's niece, also plays the slave girl Sofia and the mysterious woman in Paris who descends from the ghost.

Kyle, her boyfriend, also plays Uncle Tom, the slave boy Clem and Jack Collins.

Mabel, the last member of the group, doubles as the narrator. The entire ghost story is in her head and she's the energy of the play. In effect, as Mabel goes, so goes the play. I didn't see this until deep into rehearsals.

The first actor chosen to play Mabel was Manefa O'Connor, a senior at the University of the Virgin Islands who was due to graduate just a few weeks after the show opened. The demands of school conflicted with the demands of the production and it became obvious that she was struggling. Her primary obligation was to graduate and so I replaced her less than a week before we opened.

Her replacement was Heather Hogarth-Smith, UVI's registrar at the time, who had given an excellent portrayal of Miss Aggie in Trevor Rhone's *Old Story Time* that I had directed two years before. Heather was already part of the production, working with Manefa on her lines, so she was familiar with the part. She agreed to try to learn the role in the little time we had and we set out to make it happen. But I had made a mistake; it was simply not enough time. The final dress rehearsal was a mess and I pulled no punches in letting the company know this.

At 11:40 that night I got a text from Heather, withdrawing from the play. I panicked and fired off a response asking her to sleep on it before making that decision. As soon as I pushed 'Send' I saw with blinding clarity that she was right. Nothing could be done to prepare her to open in just a few hours. I fired off another text telling her on reflection she had made the right call. It was up to me to deal with it.

My mind flashed back to an incident in high school that was one of the most valuable lessons I ever learned. I have written about this before.

While I was president of the Montserrat Secondary School Dramatic Society we took a play to a University of the West Indies Theatre workshop in Antigua in 1968. Minutes before we were to perform there was an electricity blackout.

A tall elegant woman whose name I don't recall said, "Get the actors ready, you're going on."

"Without lights?" I asked.

She said, "Just get yourselves ready now."

I was adamant. "We're not going on without lights."

"And what should we say to the hundreds of people sitting out there in the audience?"

There was indeed a large gathering in the open-air auditorium with only the light of the moon to see by. I shrugged. That wasn't my problem.

"Listen young man," she said, "The one immutable law of theatre is, the show must go on. We will use flambeaux, or searchlights, or catch fireflies and put them in a bottle, if we have to, but the show must go on."

And so it did. Shortly before the play ended the electric lights came back on and ruined the warm, cozy embrace we had developed with the audience in the soft flambeaux lighting.

Lady of Parham was going on as scheduled.

I sent the following email to the company:

It is at times like this, when your back is against the wall, that theatre really gets exciting. Heather did an honorable thing last night. Instead of simply not showing up tonight, she gave me as much notice as she could that she has quit the show. Here is her text:

"David, so many things didn't work tonight, there is no way a few hours tomorrow can be a fix. In addition to not being well I am dealing with a personal matter that has a deadline tomorrow. I have taken the somewhat difficult decision to call it a day with the play and wish to give you the extra hours overnight to do what needs to be done. I feel badly tonight and don't expect to feel any better tomorrow night."

I understand and respect Heather's decision. Her health and wellbeing should be first. I want her to be well. And I appreciate her giving me as much notice as she could.

You feel devastated? Disappointed? Crushed? Don't be! The show must go on. That is the most immutable law of theatre: THE SHOW MUST GO ON! So we'll have a show tonight. Let's make it the best show there ever was.

I went on stage that night (and for the next seven performances) with script in hand and read the role of Mabel at the UVI Little Theatre, St. Thomas. Many audience members said that all I needed was a dress and wig to ace the part. My response? "Tyler Perry already has the patent on that and I can't risk an infringement."

About a month after that first run, UVI Theatre was invited to stage *Lady of Parham* at the NILF in Dominica. I welcomed this as an opportunity to see the play staged with a full cast for the first time. We had to rehearse with a new Mabel, stage three performances in St. Thomas then head to Dominica.

I wish it could be that easy, but experience should have taught me otherwise. The actors playing Tulip and Sauna were not available to tour, and of course, we had no Mabel. The only two actors from the original cast were Jerome Kendall and his son Jelani who played Justin and Kyle respectively. We assembled a cast and started to rehearse again.

One night at rehearsal I got an email from our new Tulip announcing her withdrawal from the play. Jerome Kendall, a comrade in arms in over 20 years of productions and Afreekan Southwell, the stage manager and a pillar of support over many years of productions, sat at a bar sadly weighing our options when the new Sauna called to tell me she was quitting as well. In my long theatre journey, strewn with obstacles and setbacks, I had never once felt genuinely defeated until that night.

Afreekan said, "Don't give up. Go home and sleep on it. But don't give up."

I went to sleep wondering if the Lady was haunting my play and if I should head post haste to Parham or Potters for a bath.

The next day the new Sauna changed her mind about dropping out of the play. The hill that had turned into Mount Kilimanjaro the night before was once again just another ordinary steep hill. With less than two weeks to opening, we were still without a Tulip/Sarah. I called in a favor from a wonderful actor I had worked with in St. Croix two years ago. She was now studying in New York for her Masters in Fine Arts (Acting). She arrived three days later ready to get to work but with an expired passport she had left in NY.

We went to work on fixing the passport issue as we jumped into an intense rehearsal schedule with Jerome Kendal as Justin and Jelani Kendall as Kyle. They were joined by Marie Paul as Mabel, Junia Washington as Sauna, and Oceana James as Tulip. We had ten days to rehearse before performing the play with a full cast for the first time in St. Thomas, then one week later in Dominica. I'm pleased to say *Lady of Parham* was joyfully received on both islands.

Dominica turned out to be particularly special. To mark the 450th Anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth year, the Nature Island Literary Festival featured drama. As a result I got to see three plays staged by three of my dear theatre buddies Alwin Bully, Dorbrene O'Marde, and Felix Fleming.

Alwin revised his play, *The Ruler*, that was a huge hit when first produced in 1977. I was pleased to see it for the first time. Dorbrene revived his delightful play, *This World Spin One Way*, which had its world premiere at the Reichhold Center for the Arts, University of the Virgin Islands in 1997, directed by Jean Small. And Felix Fleming gave a wonderful presentation of Athold Fugard's well-known play, *Sizwi Banzi is Dead*. The four of us share a common journey of writing, directing and producing plays for well over 40 years in a close to barren theatre landscape.

I'm pleased with the response that *Lady of Parham* has drawn and the interest many have expressed in seeing it performed. I hope that Pam Atherton gets her wish for this play's commercial success. I wish that you enjoy reading this script and that you have the opportunity to enjoy a performance of the play soon.

David
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