The Journals of Osborne P. Anderson

Author and director: Ted Lange

Performed at Theatre/Theater

5041 W. Pico Blvd. Los Angeles CA 90010

May 15 – June 28, 2015 Fridays-Saturdays 8 p.m.

Sundays 2 p.m.

Reviewed by Jean Libby, Allies for Freedom

Editor and compiler, John Brown Mysteries (1999)


Osborne Anderson, a printer for the African American periodical The Provincial Freeman met John Brown at an Antislavery/Emigration Convention in Chatham, Canada West in May 1858. Anderson was recruited for the Provisional Army of John Brown and elected a Congressman for the government by freed people at the two-day sessions chaired by Dr. Martin R. Delany. Frederick Douglass and his rescued assistant Shields Green were prepared for the work when John Brown wrote a Provisional Constitution at Douglass’ home in Rochester the previous winter, immediately following his successful rescue of twelve enslaved people in Missouri whom he conveyed over 1,000 miles to freedom in Canada.

Lange Productions (Mary Lange is producer and Ted Lange the author and director) bring Osborne Anderson’s written eyewitness/participant narrative of the raid to the stage with historical faith and drama that is meticulously created. Ted Lange’s calls his historical drama “footnote history”—where the African American presence is usually confined in general works. Freedom’s Dawn; The Last Days of John Brown in Virginia by Louis DeCaro, Jr. revises the history to include Osborne Anderson’s primary source account.

The five black men who fought in John Brown’s army of 19 liberators are alive as individuals with diverse backgrounds and motivation. We meet John Copeland the Oberlin College student who has gone to prison for his role in the rescue of John Price in 1858 (portrayed with great modern assertiveness by Boise Holmes) and interaction with his mother Delilah Copeland (portrayed by Starletta DuPois) who embodies the nurturing strength of black women. Shields Green leaves Frederick Douglass in Chambersburg to “go with the Old Man”
when Brown’s changed plan is met with arguments of its futility by his mentor. Green (portrayed by Adam Clark) is outstanding in his true role of believing with John Brown that the liberation must be attempted. Green’s second affirmation of remaining with the Old Man and going back to the engine house when he could have escaped with Osborne Anderson and Albert Hazlett (the only white raider onstage in Lange’s drama) is known from the account written by Anderson (portrayed by Thomas Anthony Jones with humility and effective character personality) in 1860. The story of Shields Green was expanded by Henry P. Organ, a civil rights activist in California, in John Brown Mysteries compiled, edited, and published in 1999 by Jean Libby, the author of this review. Shields Green is one of the five key figures who are executed in Virginia in December 1859. Author Ted Lange creates powerful expression for his action and consequences.

Any drama about the John Brown raid will rise or fall depending on the portrayal of John Brown. In The Journals of Osborne P. Anderson there is no disappointment. The performance by Gordon Goodman is well-crafted and satisfying, a combination of intellectual (the hallmark of Lange) and believable of Brown’s character and his ability to transcend race. He is certainly Osborne Anderson’s Brown, the commander and originator of the plan they believe will succeed. His failures are as described in A Voice from Harpers Ferry by the only member of John Brown’s army of nineteen who invaded Virginia on October 17, 1859 and escaped the battle without being killed or captured and executed. Ted Lange’s Brown has a period of self-doubt on the night before his sentence of death. It is based on an enormous silence from God about his intention with his life and martyrdom. This doubt is cast away on November 1 when John Brown finds his eternal voice:

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted,—the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection. I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case),—had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends,—either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class,—and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done -- as I have always freely admitted I have done -- in behalf of His despised
poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my
life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the
blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights
are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments,—I submit; so let it be done!

John Brown has gone to war in Virginia to free enslaved people with deliberate intention
to move toward Leesburg, where Harriet, the wife of previously enslaved Dangerfield Newby
waits for rescue. Ted Lange writes the larger role for Harriet (movingly performed by Chrystee
Pharris) in the drama. Harriet Newby and Delilah Copeland are the only women characters in
the production. Both portray the resilience and resourcefulness of black women, and the
suffering and degradation of racism and slavery. We understand how husband and son—and
by extension all people past and present—can be courageous and inspired by and for them.

It would have been easy for Lange to portray the white southerners as bumbling
buffoons. There is U. S. Army captain Jeb Stuart capturing John Brown in the silly feathered hat
of his Confederate cavalry future. The great-grand-nephew of George Washington is kidnapped
in the middle of the night and forced to hand his relic weapons to Congressman Osborne
Anderson. Dramatic license is taken to place John Wilkes Booth on the scene and in the drama
before the execution of John Brown in which his presence is documented. Who is to say when
Booth actually came in to Charlestown? Or that he could have tried to kill Brown lying on the
prison floor and was stopped by the laconic John Avis, sheriff and jailor who treats his prisoners
with respect and does his duty to protect them from violence as he can. This restraint by the
author makes the drama more believable and the slaveocracy more appropriately sinister.
When Judge Parker tells Stuart to change the report first submitted by Col. Baylor of the
Virginia militia that local slaves fought and died alongside the abolitionists we understand at
last this is the reason that Osborne Anderson’s account was usually charged by historians to be
false, if it was mentioned at all.

The official who changes the report is U. S. Army Col. Robert E. Lee, whose first
communication with the Secretary of War upon the capture of John Brown asks “what to do
with the white prisoners.” One of the local black prisoners, enslaved to John Allstadt, dies in jail
that night of “fright” and his mother on the hills above the Shenandoah River of exposure after
the spirited local response to the execution of the black raiders Copeland and Green. The
bodies of Green and Copeland are refused to be sent to the mayor of Oberlin, Ohio and instead
desecrated at the Winchester Medical School. Lee’s obstruction is to contain insurrection.

In 1999, when publishing John Brown Mysteries by Allies for Freedom, writer and author
Jimica Akinloye Kenyatta of Charles Town, West Virginia, said that our purpose was to open
doors for further inquiry, and it was not necessary to close them with conclusions. One of the
doors that Jim opened was the relationship of Martin R. Delany to jailor John Avis in his youth in
Charlestown, before he moved to Pittsburgh and became an organizer of the Underground Railroad with John Brown in association with the *North Star* published by Frederick Douglass. This is part of Lange’s drama. Seeing *John Brown Mysteries* credited in the program is a fulfillment for Allies for Freedom.

Ted Lange is an actor popularly known for his role as Isaac the bartender in the long-running TV series “The Love Boat.” His serious side is many plays and writings, with an award from the NAACP as Renaissance Man in the Theatre and training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. Here in California we know Lange as a native of Oakland, with an academic history at Oakland Technical High School where Roy Thomas was a teacher and scholarly mentoring that includes UC Berkeley Emerita Professor Margaret Wilkerson, director of Media, Arts, and Culture at the Ford Foundation.

*The Journals of Osborne P. Anderson* is the middle work of an historical trilogy by Ted Lange that begins with *George Washington’s Boy* and concludes with *Patriot Lady*. Congratulations to Lange Productions with a terrific ensemble cast performing in an intimate theater on 5401 W. Pico Blvd. that has been mounting plays for thirty-four years by the same owner, Jim Murray, serving as understudy and intermission bartender. Special mention to the set and lighting designer Micheal Ricks who transformed Lange’s vision of the actual raid with frieze scenes of the action. The play continues on weekends until June 28, 2015. Online tickets are available at [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com). Group arrangements can be made.

Jean Libby, reviewer

June 15, 2015

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*Freedom’s Dawn; The Last Days of John Brown in Virginia* by Louis DeCaro, Jr. revises the history to include Osborne Anderson’s primary source account. Published by Rowman and Littlefield, June 2015.