

FREEDOM

by Thomas Hischak

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A Dramatic Duet

by Thomas Hischak

SYNOPSIS: Word of the Emancipation Proclamation reaches a Virginia plantation, and the enslaved Zachary tells his wife Delia that they are going to escape that night and head North. He is an abusive husband and orders his wife to pack a few things while he steals some food from the plantation's larder. But the submissive Delia realizes that life with Zachary up North is not freedom. She tells him that she is going North on her own, and he laughs at her. When he leaves to get food, Delia puts a treasured family chest on her back and starts on her journey alone.

TIME: January, 1863.

SETTING: Plantation in Virginia.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 female, 1 male)

DELIA (f)..... A quiet, submissive African American woman in her early 20's. *(37 lines)*

ZACHARY (m) A harsh, controlling African American man in his early 40s, Delia's husband. *(38 lines)*

COSTUMING

DELIA – faded calico dress, brown bandana, worn brown shoes

ZACHARY – off-white work shirt, patched blue trousers, tattered straw hat, worn brown shoes.

PROPS

- 1 wooden table
- 2 wooden chairs
- 1 small bed with a worn quilt on it
- 1 small potbelly stove with a pot on it
- 1 wall shelf with some dishes and cups on it
- 1 small chest with rope straps.
- 1 man's shirt (Delia)
- Sewing materials (Delia)
- 1 carpetbag with old clothes inside (Zachary)

SET: It is a bare, one-room cabin with only some crude furniture: a table, two chairs, a bed, a small stove, a cupboard, and a chest with rope straps. The chest is not too large and is illustrated with primitive paintings of past family members. There are no windows in the cabin and only one door.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES: The dialogue in the play is an approximation of how African Americans spoke in the South in the 19th Century. Regardless of their poor grammar and lack of education, both characters are intelligent people with very focused ideas. Although Zachary is an abusive husband, he should not be played as a melodramatic villain. Delia may be quiet and cautious, she is not slow-witted.

SCENE: *The slave cabin where Zachary and his wife Delia live on a plantation in Virginia, January of 1863.*

AT START: *DELIA sits at the table darning a shirt and quietly humming a hymn. She wears a faded calico dress and a bandana. In a few moments, ZACHARY enters, all excited. He wears a work shirt, patched trousers, and a tattered hat.*

ZACHARY: It's true! It weren't no rumor! Elias overheard the news up at the big house! They call it the Proclamation! President Lincoln signed it yesterday!

DELIA: *(Still sewing.)* What's a Proclamation?

ZACHARY: It some kind of law or somethin'. Elias say it called the *(Pronouncing it carefully.)* Eman... ci... pation... Procla... mation.

DELIA: What's Emancipation?

ZACHARY: Stop asking a lot of fool questions, Delia! You listen to what I gotta say.

DELIA: *(Quietly.)* Yes, sir...

ZACHARY: This Proclamation say the slaves is free! Ain't no more slavery!

DELIA: Who say that?

ZACHARY: President Lincoln, you ignorant girl!

DELIA: But folks here in Virginia don't pay no mind to what Mr. Lincoln say.

ZACHARY: Don't matter. It be a legal thing!

DELIA: I don't think Mister Reynolds gonna think it legal. He owns us outright.

ZACHARY: Not no more. The Proclamation say we free!

DELIA: Ain't a Proclamation, just a piece of paper?

ZACHARY: *(Getting angry.)* Delia, you just a stupid girl! You don't understand nothin'!

DELIA: I sure don't understand how some piece of paper in Washington is gonna make Mister Reynolds let us walk out of here.

ZACHARY: Reynolds ain't gonna do that! You listen to me, girl, and keep yer mouth shut!

DELIA: *(Quietly.)* Yes, Zachary... Sorry.

ZACHARY: (*Calming down.*) That better. (*Beat.*) Now these Virginia owners ain't gonna pay no attention to this here Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln says their slaves is now free, but they will take no heed of that.

DELIA: So nothin's changed—

ZACHARY: What'd I say to you? You shut yer mouth and keep it shut!

DELIA: Okay...

ZACHARY: Now this here is what's changed. Used to be, if a runaway slave get caught up North, Reynolds can have him hunted down and brought back to Virginia. But that ain't so no more. A runaway in Ohio or some Northern state is now a free man. He don't have to go back South!

DELIA: But—

ZACHARY: Shut it! (*Beat.*) So there gonna be a lot more runaways, that for sure. That why we got to go tonight!

DELIA: Tonight?

ZACHARY: You heard me. By tomorrow, Reynolds gonna start doin' things to keep us on the plantation. I bet he gonna lock us in at night. Or get hisself some mean dogs on the place for when the sun goes down. He gonna make it hard to run off. That why we got to act fast. We leave tonight when it get dark enough.

DELIA: I be afraid of the dogs.

ZACHARY: (*Losing his patience.*) There ain't no dogs yet! Where he gonna get dogs on a Sunday afternoon? What's the matter with you, girl?

DELIA: But, Zachary, where we gonna go tonight?

ZACHARY: North, you ignorant thing! North to Maryland or Pennsylvania. We just go North! We travel at night and hide during the day. I heard all about how it's done from Amos. He run off two years ago, but got caught in Pennsylvania and was brought back. But that ain't gonna happen to us!

DELIA: It ain't? How come?

ZACHARY: (*Losing his temper.*) Cause of this here Emancipation Proclamation! Can't you understand nothin'?

DELIA: I ain't leavin' here without my things.

ZACHARY: What things? We ain't got no things!

DELIA: My mother's shell necklace. The calico shawl Missy gave me two Christmases ago. And the glass rattle Mrs. Walters give me when the baby come.

ZACHARY: That stuff not important. What we need to bring is all the warm clothes we got. It be cold up North. *(Goes to the bed and picks up a worn quilt.)* This quilt be just what we need.

DELIA: That quilt belong to Lottie. She let me borrow it when I had the whooping cough.

ZACHARY: She ain't gettin' it back now. It ours.

DELIA: *(Going over to the chest.)* And what about my chest? It been in the family since my great grandmother. She the one done painted these pictures on it. They be of all my family at the beginning. *(Points.)* This here little gal be my Aunt Sukey and this baby be my mother.

ZACHARY: *(Laughs cruelly.)* That be a good way to escape through the woods with us carrying that old chest! You crazy, girl!

DELIA: I'll carry it.

ZACHARY: You'll carry what I tells you! Warm clothes and blankets. And we'll need food. I can break into the larder once the kitchen help done washin' up. Good thing they done baking today. There be plenty of bread and muffins. And they got lots of storage apples in the cellar. I knows how to break into the cellar.

DELIA: *(Looking lovingly at the chest.)* I recall the day my mother died, she say, "Delia, you take good care of that chest. It be our family history."

ZACHARY: *(Sneers.)* Family history! Just a bunch of pictures of field hands and washer women! *(Beat.)* You best start gathering up what we need, Delia. I wonder if we still got that old carpet bag somewheres. *(Gets down on his knees and looks under the bed.)* It come in useful now.

DELIA: I put the baby in it sometimes to keep her warm. Don't know where it be now.

ZACHARY: I hope you ain't gone and give it away. You always giving things away. How many times I got to beat you for that. *(Pulls carpet bag from under the bed.)* Here it is! *(Stands up again.)* It gonna work fine. *(Starts going through the chest.)* Let's see what we got in here. *(Rummages through the clothes in the chest.)*

DELIA: You beat me a lot of times. Not just for giving things away.

ZACHARY: *(Not paying attention.)* What's that you say?

DELIA: Sometimes you done beat me for no reason at all.

ZACHARY: Some of these old rags not worth keepin'. *(Sees DELIA just standing there.)* What you just standin' there for? Ain't you heard me? Start gathering up things.

DELIA: One time you beat me so's my eye got all puffed up, and I couldn't see for three weeks.

ZACHARY: What is you yapping' on about now? Do what I says and get packing up what we gonna need. *(Continues to go through the chest.)*

DELIA: *(After a long pause.)* Zachary...

ZACHARY: *(Annoyed.)* What now?

DELIA: Zachary... I ain't goin' with you.

ZACHARY: What kind of talk is that? We gotta get up North, so—

DELIA: No, Zachary. I mean I ain't going with you. I'm goin'... but not with you.

ZACHARY: *(Laughs.)* Is that so? You gonna escape by your lonesome? You gonna find your way North by yourself? You be lost after one hour!

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