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Southern Promises

by Thomas Bradshaw

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

NEW YORK HOLLYWOOD LONDON TORONTO

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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Performance Space 122 presents

Southern Promises

By Thomas Bradshaw

September 7-27

Isaiah/Man 1.....	Peter McCabe*
Elizabeth.....	Lia Aprile*
David.....	Jeff Biehl*
John.....	Hugh Sinclair*
Benjamin.....	Erwin E. A. Thomas*
Charlotte.....	Sadrina Johnson*
Peter/Imaginary Slave.....	Derrick LeMont Sanders
Doctor/Clerk/Man 2.....	Matt Huffman

Director.....	Jose Zayas
Playwright.....	Thomas Bradshaw
Stage Manager.....	Teddy Nicholas
Set Designer.....	Ryan Elliot Kravetz
Lighting Designer.....	Evan Purcell
Sound Designer.....	David M. Lawson
Costume Designer.....	Carla Bellisio
Dialect Coach.....	Maggie Surovell
Assistant Stage Manager.....	Toby Ring Thelin
Sound Board Operator.....	Eileen Goddard

* Appears courtesy of Actors' Equity Association.

Presented in conjunction with The Immediate Theatre Company and Queens Theater in the Park as part of B.O.B., P.S. 122's intra-borough commissioning program. Produced in collaboration with the David Schwartz Foundation. Southern Promises was developed, in part, through IRT Theater's Artist in Residence Program. www.irttheater.org Production Assistance Grant provided by New York Theatre Workshop.

QUEENS
theatre

CHARACTERS

ISAIAH – 32, the Master of the plantation

ELIZABETH – 28, his wife

DAVID – 30, Isaiah's brother

JOHN – 32, Elizabeth's brother, a minister

BENJAMIN – 32, a loyal slave

CHARLOTTE – 30, Benjamin's wife, a light-skinned mulatto slave. She should look almost white.

PETER – 37, a slave, Benjamin's friend

IMAGINARY SLAVE

DOCTOR

CLERK

MAN # 1

MAN # 2

Casting note: The role of Man # 1 can be played by the same actor who plays Isaiah. The roles of Doctor, Clerk, and Man # 2 can be played by the same actor. The role of Imaginary Slave should be played by the same actor who plays Peter. A total of 8 actors are needed.

SETTING

Louisa County, Virginia, forty five miles from the city of Richmond. The year is 1848. The play takes place on a small plantation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All characters should be played with the utmost honesty and sincerity. The irony in the play should be underplayed rather than overplayed at all times. The characters in this play feel that all their actions are completely necessary and unavoidable. The play should be directed in a straightforward and realistic manner.

Scene One

(At rise are ISAIAH and ELIZABETH. ISAIAH is on his death bed. He has rheumatism and tuberculosis. He is in the midst of a coughing fit.)

ELIZABETH. *(She strokes his head.)* How are you feeling dear?

ISAIAH. The rheumatism seems better, but I can't manage this cough. Beth, I'm scared.

ELIZABETH. About what?

ISAIAH. I think I'm going to die tonight.

ELIZABETH. Hush your mouth. You are not going to die under my watch, Isaiah. You're a good man and you've led a good Christian life, therefore you have nothing to fear. God will heal you and sustain you.

ISAIAH. Even the holiest of men must eventually die.

ELIZABETH. You quit this morbid talk. You hear me?

ISAIAH. *(has another violent coughing fit)* I had my lawyer change my will last week.

ELIZABETH. What do you mean?

ISAIAH. I'm going to free all of our slaves after I die.

ELIZABETH. Your fever must rising. I'm going to call the doctor.

(She starts to leave the room and he grabs her arm.)

ISAIAH. Listen to me Beth. I have had a lot of time to ponder this since I've been bed ridden, and I've come to the conclusion that the abolitionists are right. I have come to believe that slavery is a mortal sin and a blight upon our civilization. In order to cross the gates of heaven my slaves must be emancipated.

(ELIZABETH is silent.)

I know this is hard for you to hear, but trust me Beth. It is God's will.

(He has another coughing fit.)

ISAIAH. *(cont.)* Will you promise me that you will see to it that our slaves are freed upon my death?

(long pause)

ELIZABETH. I promise.

(They kiss.)

ISAIAH. You have given me the best years of my life. I love you.

ELIZABETH. I love you too.

ISAIAH. Will you fetch Benjamin? I wish to have a word with him.

ELIZABETH. Of course.

(She leaves the room and comes back with BENJAMIN. The master and he grew up together.)

BENJAMIN. You wanted to see me Massa?

ISAIAH. Come close Ben.

(BENJAMIN goes to ISAIAH's bedside. ISAIAH has another coughing fit.)

BENJAMIN. Do you want me to fetch you some water?

ISAIAH. No. Just hold my hand and stay with me.

(BENJAMIN takes ISAIAH's hand.)

How's your wife?

BENJAMIN. Charlotte's well massa. She's awful sad about your illness. All the slaves is sad. You's the kindest massa a slave could ever hope for.

ISAIAH. Do you remember when we were children Ben? How we used to catch June bugs by that creek at the edge of the plantation.

BENJAMIN. I sure do massa. Those was some good times.

ISAIAH. *(ISAIAH starts to laugh.)* And how we used to scare my sister Mary half to death by jumping out of the bushes when she'd be walking up the road from town.

(They both laugh.)

ISAIAH. (*cont.*) You know Ben, I've always thought of you as a brother. I want you to know that.

BENJAMIN. I'm honored massa. I've always loved you.

(**ISAIAH** kisses **BENJAMIN**'s hand.)

ISAIAH. I've decided to emancipate you after I die.

BENJAMIN. What? What do you mean by emancipate?

ISAIAH. It means that you're going to be free Benjamin. You, your wife, and all my other slaves.

BENJAMIN. I don't know what to say massa. Thank you! Thank you! You's a saint. Gabriel and Saint Peter will welcome you at the gates of heaven.

ELIZABETH. I think your master needs to be left alone now to get his rest Benjamin.

BENJAMIN. Yes, of course missus.

(*He starts to leave and ELIZABETH stops him at the door.*)

ELIZABETH. Benjamin, I don't want you to repeat what the master told you just yet. I don't want the other niggers to get too excited. After all, with God's help the master might live another few years.

BENJAMIN. Yes ma'am.

(**BENJAMIN** exits.)

ISAIAH. Will you bring in our son Beth? I wish to see him before I go to sleep.

ELIZABETH. Of course dear.

(*goes into the hallway and calls to CHARLOTTE*)

Charlotte? Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE. (*O.S.*) Yes ma'am.

ELIZABETH. Will you bring Isaiah Junior? Your master wishes to see his son.

(**CHARLOTTE** enters with **ISAIAH** Junior in her arms. She brings him to the Master's bedside.)

(*lights down*)

End Scene

Scene Two

(At rise we hear funeral bells. Word has just gotten out on the plantation that ISAIAH is dead. BENJAMIN's wife CHARLOTTE is weeping alone on stage. He enters and says nothing at first.)

BENJAMIN. I guess you heard that massa's dead.

CHARLOTTE. *(softly)* Yes. He was a good man.

He treated us so well. What will become of us now?

BENJAMIN. What do you mean?

CHARLOTTE. Suppose mistress sells us? We may never see each other again. Suppose we get bought by an unkind massa who whips us for every little thing. Aren't you afraid?

BENJAMIN. I have to tell you something.

CHARLOTTE. What?

BENJAMIN. You have to swear to secrecy.

CHARLOTTE. I swear.

BENJAMIN. I'm just as sad as you are that massa's dead. You know he was like a brother to me. But while he was on his deathbed, God bless his soul, he told me that we was gonna be free after he died.

CHARLOTTE. Free?

BENJAMIN. Yes. He said that we was gonna be free. It's in his will.

CHARLOTTE. *(She drops to her knees.)* Halleluiah! Praise the good lord!

Do you know what this means Benjamin? It means that we can start a family.

BENJAMIN. *(overjoyed)* I know!

CHARLOTTE. I always wanted to have a baby with you, but I ain't wanted to bring no baby into this world if it gonna be born a slave. I'd rather kill my own child than have it grow up in bondage.

Now we can have a baby that'll be born free! Hallelujah!

(They start to kiss and take off each other's clothes and then CHARLOTTE stops suddenly.)

CHARLOTTE. *(cont.)* Are you sure?

BENJAMIN. Sure about what?

CHARLOTTE. That we're gonna be free.

BENJAMIN. Yes. Don't worry. Now lay back so that we can start a family.

(They giggle.)

(She lays back and he enters her. They have sex as the lights fade to black.)

End Scene

Scene Three

(At rise ELIZABETH is onstage alone. BENJAMIN enters.)

BENJAMIN. You wanted to see me ma'am?

ELIZABETH. Yes Benjamin, I have an urgent matter that I must discuss with you.

BENJAMIN. What is it?

ELIZABETH. You haven't told any of the slaves about the conversation that you and your master had on his deathbed, have you?

BENJAMIN. No ma'am.

ELIZABETH. Your master had a high fever and was delirious when he told you that you would be free. You will not be freed. It is God's will that you remain on this plantation until your dying day. Do you understand?

BENJAMIN. *(Hesitant. Heartbroken.)* Yes ma'am.

ELIZABETH. Good. Now take off your shirt.

BENJAMIN. Why ma'am?

ELIZABETH. Your place is not to ask me questions. Take off your shirt nigger.

(He takes off his shirt.)

Now take off your pants.

(He hesitates and takes off his pants. He is completely naked.)

Very good Benjamin.

Now lift up my dress and climb on top of me.

BENJAMIN. *(Very hesitant. Almost crying.)* But ma'am. My wife.

ELIZABETH. If you don't do as I say I'll have you whipped until your blood runs like a river! Now lift up my dress and climb on top of me nigger!

(He lifts up her dress and climbs on top of her.)

You know what to do Benjamin.

(He enters her and she lets out a moan. He starts to move back and forth inside her.)

ELIZABETH. (*cont.*) Faster nigger! Faster!

(He's pounding into her as hard as he can and she has an orgasm. He has an orgasm a few moments later.)

(They are still. BENJAMIN is guilt ridden.)

Now go fetch me some coal. The furnace in the kitchen is running low.

(BENJAMIN pulls out of her and gets out of the bed.

ELIZABETH puts her dress back over her legs. He puts back on his clothes. ELIZABETH sits up and watches him leave.)

End Scene

Scene Four

(At rise ELIZABETH and her brother-in-law DAVID are in the parlor of her house.)

DAVID. How are you holding up Beth?

ELIZABETH. It's very difficult to manage now that Isaiah's gone. I miss him so much.

DAVID. We must find comfort in the fact that he's at home with Jesus now.

ELIZABETH. That is a comfort. But he was so young. Our son probably won't even remember him when he grows up.

DAVID. God works in mysterious ways. We must not question God's will.

ELIZABETH. Yes.

DAVID. How is my nephew?

ELIZABETH. He's very healthy. I thank God for that.

DAVID. Isaiah's spirit lives on in him.

ELIZABETH. Indeed.

DAVID. So Elizabeth, how are you going to go about setting your slaves free?

ELIZABETH. What?

DAVID. Isaiah told me that he willed his slaves to be set free after he died.

ELIZABETH. I was not aware that Isaiah had corresponded with you about that matter.

DAVID. Indeed he did. He asked me to see to it that his wishes were executed properly.

ELIZABETH. I have no patience with people who set niggers at liberty. It is the very worst thing you can do for them. It is true that my dear husband, just before he died, willed his niggers free. But I and all our friends know very well that he was too good a man to have ever thought of doing such an unkind and foolish thing, had he been in his right mind. Therefore, I had the will altered as it should have been in the first place.

DAVID. Do you mean, Beth, that willing the slaves free was unjust to yourself, or unkind to them?

ELIZABETH. I mean that it was decidedly unkind to the servants themselves. It always seems to me such a cruel thing to turn niggers loose to fend for themselves, when there are so many good masters to take care of them.

I care nothing for the niggers, on my own account, for they are a great deal more trouble than they are worth, I sometimes wish that there was not one of them in the world, for the ungrateful wretches are always running away.

DAVID. If they are so much trouble, then why not set them free and release yourself from the burden of caring for them?

ELIZABETH. There is no good reason why property should be squandered! If my son and myself had the money for those valuable niggers, just see what a great deal of good we could do for the poor, and in sending missionaries abroad to the poor heathens, who have never heard the name of our blessed redeemer. My dear brother who is a Christian minister has advised me to sell every blessed one of them for what they will fetch, and go live in peace with him in New York.

DAVID. Your brother being a good Christian minister, it's strange he did not advise you to let the poor negroes have their liberty and go North.

ELIZABETH. It's not at all strange David, it's not at all strange. My brother knows what's best for niggers; he has always told me that southern niggers were much better off than the free niggers in the North. In fact, I don't believe there are any white laboring people in the world who are as well off as the slaves.

DAVID. You are quite mistaken Beth. For instance, my great aunt before she died, emancipated all her slaves, and sent them to Ohio, where they are getting along well. I saw several of them last summer myself.

ELIZABETH. Well, freedom may do for your Aunt's niggers, but it will never do for mine; and plague them, they shall never have it!

DAVID. What about Benjamin, won't you at least free him? Isaiah and I grew up with Benjamin and feel a strong bond towards him.

ELIZABETH. I will not free Benjamin, but I won't sell him either. I plan to bring him to New York to serve me.

DAVID. I see that I cannot change your mind, so I will take my leave of you. It was lovely to see you Beth.

ELIZABETH. It was a pleasure to see you David. Take care of yourself.

(He exits.)

End Scene

Scene Five

(At rise it is three weeks later. DAVID and ELIZABETH's brother JOHN have shown up unannounced. They knock. BENJAMIN answers the door.)

BENJAMIN. Hello Master David, Hello Reverend John. Do you want to see the mistress?

DAVID. Yes Benjamin, may we come in?

BENJAMIN. Of course. You can wait in the parlor, and I'll fetch her.

JOHN. Thank you Benjamin.

(BEN shows them to the parlor then goes to find Elizabeth. ELIZABETH enters a few moments later.)

ELIZABETH. What on earth are you two doing here? John, why aren't you in New York?

JOHN. There's an urgent matter that we wish to speak to you about, and we thought it would be better done in person.

ELIZABETH. Nothing's wrong I hope!

JOHN. No. No. Quite the opposite.

DAVID. You see Elizabeth, I have come to ask your hand in marriage.

ELIZABETH. How dare you make such a proposal? Your brother has barely been in the ground a month.

JOHN. I know that it all seems sudden, but I think that this is a very good idea.

DAVID. You see Elizabeth, I've been in love with you for a very long time, but I couldn't express my feelings because you were married to my brother. Now that he's gone I thought that I should make my feelings known.

ELIZABETH. It was your idea for me to go to New York, John. Have you changed your mind?

JOHN. I think it's best for your son that he grow up with someone who can be a real father to him.

ELIZABETH. You could be a father to him!

JOHN. It wouldn't be the same. I have obligations of my own. Besides, you're a young woman. Surely you don't plan to stay single forever. If you marry a man who has no relation to your son, how will your son be treated? Step-parents are notoriously cruel to their step-children. If you marry David you know that he will love Isaiah Junior as his father would have.

ELIZABETH. You make excellent points John. And I wouldn't be averse to marrying David except for the fact that he's an abolitionist! Do you know that he had the audacity to tell me to free my slaves!

DAVID. John and I have had several conversations regarding this matter. If you agree to marry me, then I won't object to you keeping the slaves.

ELIZABETH. Not objecting will not be enough. If we marry you will be Master of this plantation. And as Master you must not show these niggers one ounce of kindness. Kindness ruins those animals.

DAVID. I understand. I am willing to do anything to secure your love.

JOHN. So are we agreed? Will you marry David?

ELIZABETH. I will.

JOHN. Excellent! I'll perform the ceremony this evening.

End Scene

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