

Excerpt - DOUGLASS: The North Star
Actor's Paint

By

Kerry Gleason
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INT - LECTURE HALL -- PITTSFIELD MASS. - NIGHT

CROWD NOISE. Frederick Douglass speaks passionately in a half-filled hall. Garrison and Phillips look on intently.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

I can tell you what I have seen with my own eyes, felt on my own person ... I'm not from one of those states in the sunny South where slaves are in their most degraded conditions. No, I'm from Maryland, where slavery exists in its mildest form. I'm a fugitive from a slavemaster who wants to bring me back to bondage.

HECKLER #1

You're not a slave any more than I am.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Why do you doubt me?

HECKLER #1

You're too educated to be a slave.

HECKLER #2

Yeah! Listen to all those fancy words. Slaves don't use that kind of educated language on the farms in Maryland. Or anywhere else.

HECKLER #3

Mr. Garrison, your movement is a hoax! This man is an actor!

UPROAR from the crowd. Garrison bolts onto the stage.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Stop! Wait! Kind sir, come up on stage -- as a witness of proof.

Bewildered, Heckler #3 climbs to the stage next to Frederick. Frederick takes his shirt off. The crowd MURMURS.

HECKLER #2

Stop him! This isn't proper!

Frederick turns with his back to the audience. His scars are clearly evident, even from a distance.

(CONTINUED)

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Do you see the stripes of slavery?
(agitated) C'mon, do you see the
stripes? Good sir, touch my back to
prove to yourself! Please, do it.

Reluctantly, he rubs his fingers along Frederick's back.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Are these wounds merely an actor's
trick? Are they painted on, sir?

HECKLER #3

(sheepishly)

No, they are not painted. These are
real scars.

The crowd collectively GASPS. Frederick turns and nods to
WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON and Phillips, a look of smug
satisfaction on his face as the heckler slinks off.

EXT. BOSTON STREET - TWILIGHT

Garrison, Phillips and Frederick walk.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Did you see the look on their
faces? Oh, my. They'll never doubt
me again.

WENDELL PHILLIPS

The tour is a smashing success. But
Frederick, we have a problem.
You're too good. You come across
being better educated than your
audience. They've gone to Harvard.
And Yale. They have the benefit of
the finest education in the
country.

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON

You heard it tonight. The
credibility of the entire movement
is being questioned.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

I proved my point in the end.

WENDELL PHILLIPS

Yes, but you can't take your shirt
off at every rally.

(CONTINUED)

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
How, then, should I proceed?

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON
Moderation. I don't know. Use the
voice of the common people. Maybe
use "Plantation-speak."

WENDELL PHILLIPS
Yes. Sound more like plain folk.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
Plantation speak?! I won't do that.
No, no, no. I must elevate the
thinking of white and black men
alike, to accept that an African
American can be educated, that he
can articulate higher reason. That
he can contribute to the national
intellect and change this nation's
destiny.

WENDELL PHILLIPS
Then you need to spell out all the
details. Names, places, everything.
And how you educated yourself.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
My speeches would drone for hours.

WENDELL PHILLIPS
Put it in a book.

Frederick raises his eyebrows, thinking.