

PRESS PACK



THE

BELL AFFAIR



DANIEL AND MARY BELL SUED FOR THEIR FREEDOM, THEN LED ONE OF THE LARGEST ESCAPE ATTEMPTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY. ABOUT TO BE SEPARATED, THEY WERE FORCED TO MAKE A TERRIFYING CHOICE.

THE BELLS

Daniel and Mary Bell sued for their freedom from slavery and won. After slaveholders threaten to re-enslave them and their children, the Bells led one of the largest escape attempts in American history. Based on the true story.

Their inspiring story is brought to cinema for the first time.

In the summer of 1835, a strike at the Washington Navy Yard fueled a citywide race riot. The U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, Francis Scott Key, set out to prosecute abolitionist Reuben Crandall for libelous sedition and the intent to incite a slave revolt. Freedom hung in the balance.

In the midst of this political turmoil, Daniel Bell convinced Mary's dying slaveholder, Robert Armstead, to emancipate Mary and the children. Two days later, Armstead died, and his widow Susan Armstead refused to honor the Bells' freedom.

She arranged to have Daniel secretly sold. Slave traders infiltrated the Navy Yard, captured an unsuspecting Bell on the shop floor, and dragged him in chains to the slave pen at the infamous Yellow House.

Daniel fought a desperate and expensive battle in court to win his own freedom and protect his family from Susan Armstead. When Mary and the children's freedom suits failed in the courts, the Bells attempted to escape enslavement, setting off for freedom on a schooner called the *Pearl*.

The film was created with major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Maryland Humanities, The Kitty M. Perkins Foundation, and the Office of Research and Economic Development at The University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

ALL AFFAIR

This debut feature comes from first-time filmmaker and director Kwakiutl Dreher, digital artist, animator and first-time producer Michael Burton, and prize-winning historian and Guggenheim Fellow William G. Thomas III.

Filmed and directed remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, the cast was never in the same room with each other or with the director at the same time.



Left to right:

Arista Jackson as Ann Bell

Myeisha Essex as Mary Bell

Anthony Wilcox as Daniel Bell

Darla Davenport as Lucy Bell



Downloadable Press Images here



The Bell Affair Premiere at
The Prince George's Publick Playhouse
6/2/22



Downloadable Film Stills here





The Bell Affair TRAILER

Film Specifications

Runtime: 1:23:33

Aspect ratio: 16:9

Formats: DCP and MP4 @1080HD

Dolby 5.1 Surround or stereo

Total budget: \$228,000

From the Director:

In telling the Bell's true story I hope Americans will see slavery in more personal terms. Too often slavery is depicted as nameless and faceless. Few enslaved families are mentioned in history textbooks. I want to move audiences to understand the experience of these families and see them in ways that they will never forget. I also want audiences to care about this history in ways that move them to reckon with the legacies of history in their own lives. I want the Bells, and other families like them, to be remembered.

The Bell Affair relies on what he calls "historical imagination"--the idea that we must use our imagination to illuminate the lives of people for whom there are few documentary records. We draw on an extensive and detailed analysis of the [original archival documents](#) about the Bell family, but we have written their dialogue around and through what can discern from these records.

We are trying in this film to move beyond the commonsense notions of enslavement depicted so often in film: the slave ship, the slaver's whip, the chain, and the auction block. Slavery was brutal, violent, and dehumanizing, but too many have trafficked in its violence, perpetuated its trauma, and fed on its brutality. We need fresh stories, equally unflinching, but more attuned to the full range of human experience and emotion.

We use animation because we want to move beyond the commonplace visual images of slavery. Animation provides viewers the opportunity to engage with difficult subjects of history, reminding us of our preconceived feelings about historical images, with characters who possess life-like qualities. The effect brings a visceral quality to The Bell Affair that makes dynamic the emotions of our characters as we witness them navigate through the uncertainty of their day-to-day lives.

Production: Thirty-two actors filmed themselves, in their homes, alone during the pandemic. It was extraordinary! Costumes were made using virtual fittings, talent packages provided detailed instructions, and Zoom table-reads gave Kwakiutl Dreher time to direct and coach the actors. A rolling production/ post pipeline allowed the art and editing teams to conduct reshoots and coordinate a timely completion of the film. It was not without love and great effort and ingenuity that The Bell Affair was completed.

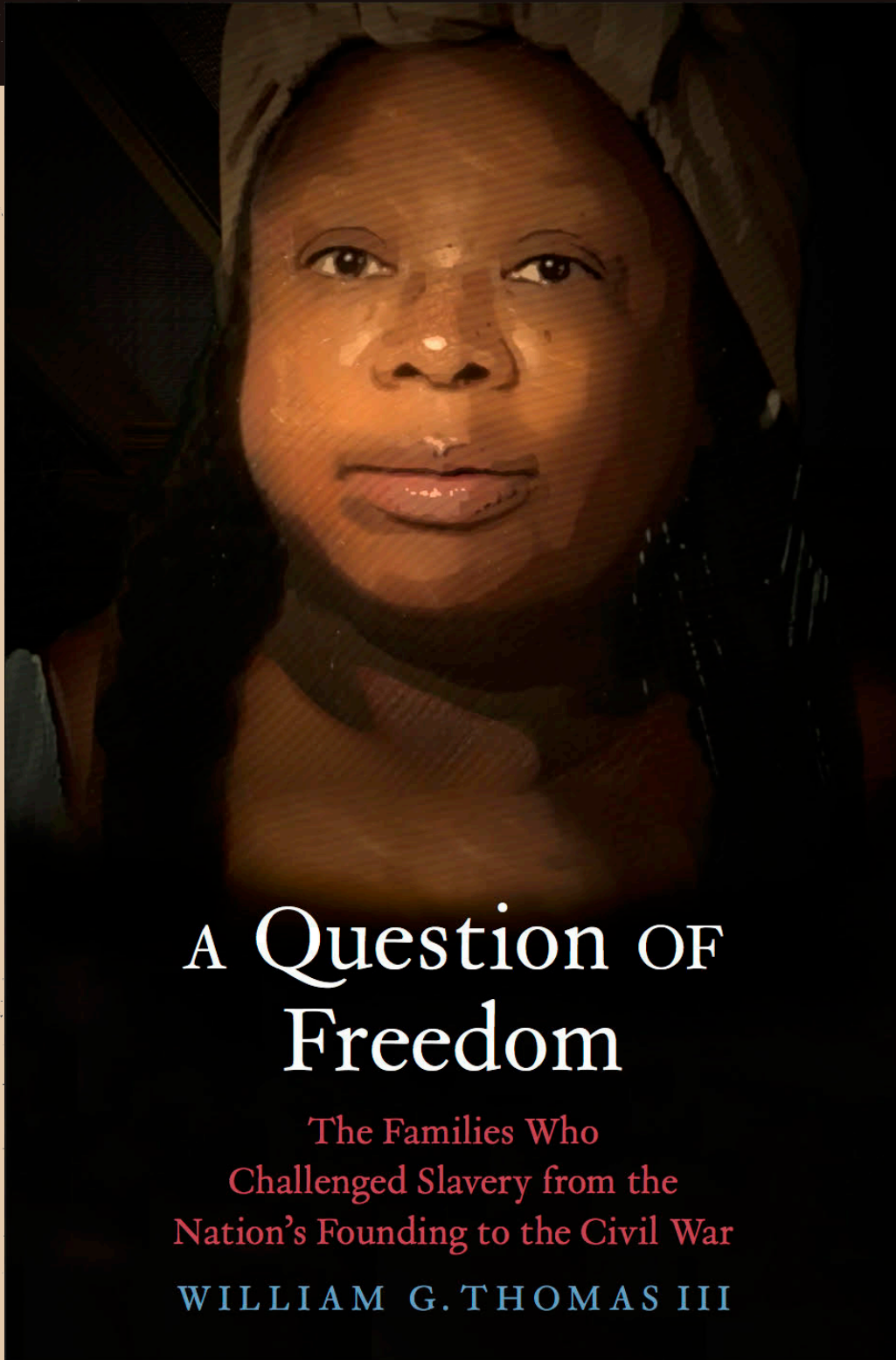
www.ANIMATINGHISTORY.com @ANIMATINGHISTORY on Facebook

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Based On A True Story
FROM THE AWARD-WINNING BOOK

SCHOLARSHIP



A Question OF Freedom

The Families Who
Challenged Slavery from the
Nation's Founding to the Civil War

WILLIAM G. THOMAS III

Jacket illustration: Margarette Joyner as Ann Williams in *Anna* (Salt Marsh Productions, 2018)
Visual effects art by Michael Burton

Winner of the 2021 Mark Lynton History Prize / Lukas Prizes
(Columbia School of Journalism and the Nieman Foundation for Journalism)
Winner of the 2021 SHEAR Best Book Prize
2021 CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title
2021 PROSE Finalist
2021 George Washington Prize Finalist

"A rich, roiling history that Thomas recounts with eloquence and skill."—Jennifer Szalai, *New York Times*

"A fresh, disquieting look into America's traumatic past."—Kirkus, Starred Review

"Gripping . . . Profound and prodigiously researched."—Alison L. Lacroix, *Washington Post*

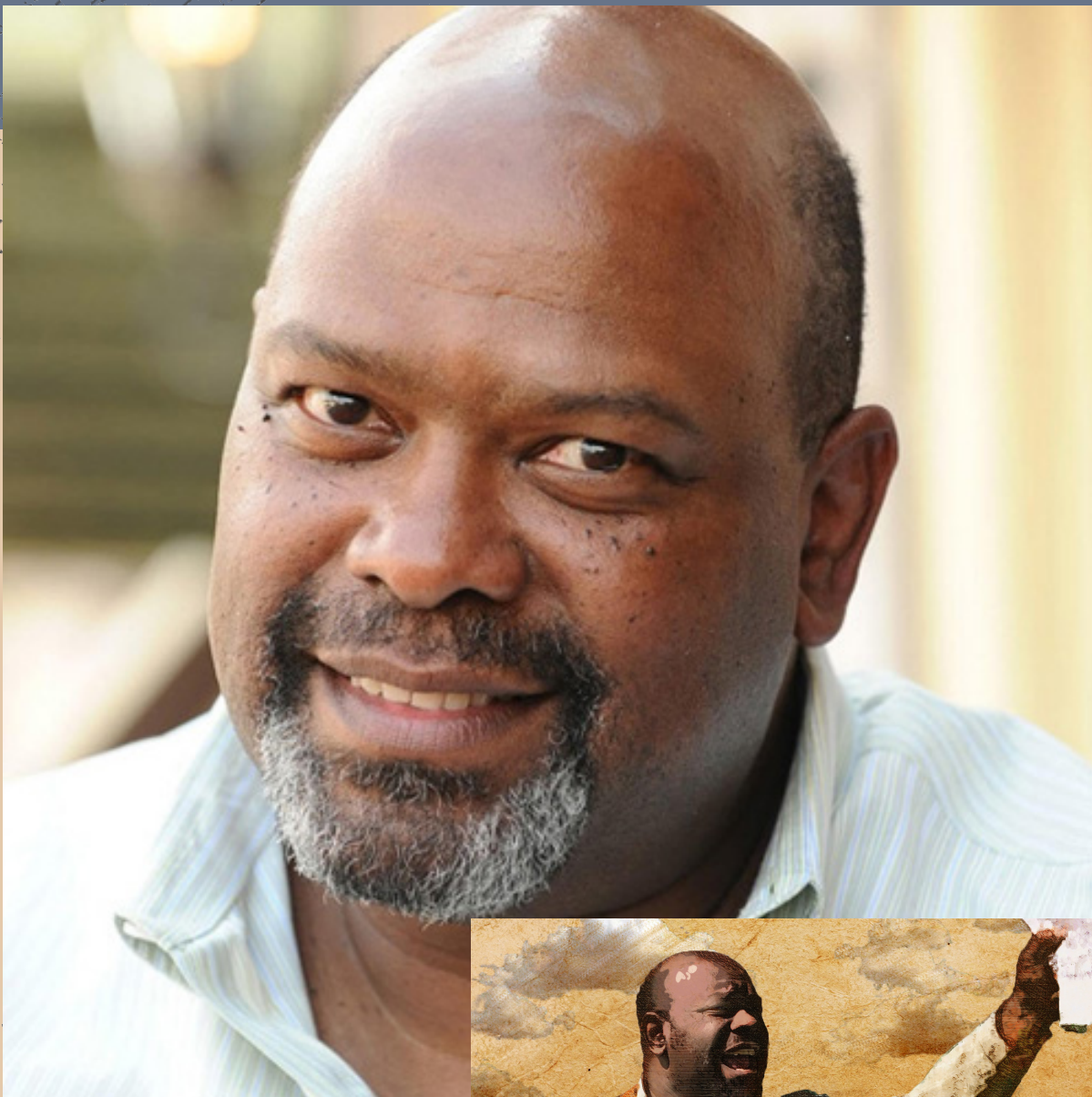
"William Thomas casts a bright light into the period's darkness. . . . He reveals a remarkable struggle for freedom, one buoyed at first by new aspirations in the broader culture and later doomed by rekindled fears. . . . Valuable and provocative. . . . Mr. Thomas brings a clear and sensitive eye to the tangled relationship of black and white Americans in the early 19th century."—Fergus Bordewich, *Wall Street Journal*

"William Thomas has produced an important and astonishing chronicle of the legal battles waged by enslaved people for their own freedom. Braiding white-knuckle courtroom drama together with a searing exploration of his own family history, he redefines slavery's place in early American law—not an inherent feature, but a dubious institution whose contradictions were exploited by the enslaved to protect themselves and their families."—Yoni Appelbaum, Senior Editor, *The Atlantic*

"A revelatory and fluidly written chronicle of attempts by enslaved families in Prince George's County, Md., to win their freedom through the courts. . . an essential account of an overlooked chapter in the history of American slavery. . ."—*Publisher's Weekly* starred review

Meet the Talent

THE BELL APPEAR



Anthony Wilcox as Daniel Bell

Anthony has always thought of being an actor/storyteller. After serving 5 years and a honorable discharge from the US Marines Corps, Anthony re-explored and re-establish his goals, he attend Glassboro State College (Rowan University) as a non-traditional student with a goal of become a trial lawyer. A professor suggested he take an acting class to help, life took hold and he put acting to the side. Once his daughter began acting the bug bit him again. He is forever searching to expand his acting horizons and leap for boundless opportunity. Anthony has appeared in eight feature films, numerous short films, TV, commercials and stage plays.

Today, Anthony finds himself in the best position as an up and coming actor for roles as a father figure, the uncle that explains life, or the grandfather figure can't wait to hug that baby. The range of focus in Anthony's toolbox just may surprise you.



Myeisha Essex as Mary Bell

Myeisha Essex portrays Mary Bell and was excited for the opportunity to be a part of this impactful film displaying the dynamics of a devoted family! Myeisha also recently contributed to independent films; *Strange Constellations*, *One More*, and *Deployed*. Her theater credits include, *Diary of Anne Frank*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Ragtime*, and *The Anatomy of Gray*. She has taken classes at the Theater Lab in D.C. and is currently training at the 402 Arts Collective. Her mission for her career and work is to encourage those who have been overlooked to "take up space and be valiant."

"It's not about what you have accomplished...it's about who you've lifted up, who you've made better. It's about what you've given back." -Denzel Washington



Arista Jackson as Ann Bell

Born and raised in LA by a single mother, Arista D’Nae Jackson knew what strength and resilience looked like from a very young age. While she never had a plan, she inherited an unshakable faith and unstoppable drive that would take her places she never imagined. In college, Arista was scouted at a local gym and given the opportunity to become a personal trainer. While she was passionate about fitness, she was disheartened by the lack of representation in the industry. So she set out to change that and found herself immersed in the world of bodybuilding as a figure competitor. She made her way to the national stage as a ranked figure competitor for 5 years straight. With 20+ years under her belt as a seasoned coach/trainer, she set her sights on a passion project to bring bodybuilding to the mainstream through a reality competition. While developing the show in 2019, she hired Stan Roth as her acting coach to help her feel comfortable in front of the camera. One thing led to another and she found herself at an audition for a feature film. She booked the lead role and her acting career was born. Like all things in Arista’s life, she applied her competitive spirit, tough mentality, and discipline to the craft. In 2020, she enrolled in a Meisner Technique training and booked another role as Ann Bell in the film “The Bell Affair”. She is also deeply passionate about racial inequality and actively seeking opportunities to tell rich stories of black resilience and love. When Arista is not acting or honing her craft, she continues her personal training practice in Oakland, CA where she resides.



Darla Davenport as Lucy Bell

Darla Davenport is an actress, singer, poet, and professional drummer. She was born and raised in Columbia, S.C., and is the daughter of the late William Earl and Dorothy Mae Davenport. Darla discovered her voice and talent at an early age. She was known to have memorized long Easter speeches and recited them with confidence and poise. She exhibited that same confidence when singing in the choir and playing drums; a born performer. She was featured in the movie, *"Maybe Next Week Sometime"* at 13, playing drums for the local gospel group, Big Betty and the Spiritualites. Throughout her youth, she auditioned and landed roles in school and regional plays. At 18, Darla published her first book of poetry, entitled, *Ipothia (In Pursuit of the Highest in All)*. She attended Columbia High School, where she participated in the statewide honors chorus, drama club, and the band.

It was at Hampton Institute (University) where Darla perfected her acting chops as a member of The Hampton Players appearing in Ntozake Shange's *"For Colored Girls,"* Lorraine Hansberry, *"A Raisin in the Sun,"* and *"God's Trombones"* by James Weldon Johnson.

Darla played the role of Samantha Simmons in *"House of Cards"* and has been featured in several commercials and reality shows, including ABC, *The Toy Box*, and season one of *American Inventor*.

THE BELL AFFAIR



Wayne Matychuk as Francis Scott Key

Wayne enjoys acting in period films. He so enjoyed the role of Francis Scott Key in *The Bell Affair* as it was one of his most demanding and most fulfilling lead roles. His role as Augustine Washington, the father of George Washington in the film *Washington's Armor* is another role that has recently been released.

As a young actor in his early school days Wayne was greatly inspired by two of his Western action heroes, Fess Parker (Daniel Boone TV series and Davey Crockett Disney Films) and John Wayne (How The West Was Won, The Cowboys, Rio Lobo). Wayne has always been inspired by these heroic action characters and has greatly enjoyed the action roles he has filmed, especially as The Brain in *Night Guard* and as Secret Agent Jeffries in *Level Up*. To keep in readiness for his action roles Wayne enjoys triathlon, soccer, and weight lifting. Wayne enjoys a challenge and several marathons, century bike rides, and mountain climbs are among his list of accomplishments.

Wayne considers himself a lifelong learner and has appreciated the many lessons acting has brought during his career. He considers the intensive actor training from Tom Todoroff and Rich Swingle as his two most enlightening classes. Learning to bring true emotion to the camera has been an area that Wayne excels in and he was recently awarded Best Dramatic Scene at the Content 21 Film Festival for his dramatic portrayal of a broken father in the film *Paralyzed*.



Deborah Madick as Susan Armistead

Deborah recently portrayed Susan Armistead in the historical documentary, *The Bell Affair*, Dr. Barbara Williams in finding Joy and Roxanne in award-winning film, 2020 Best Picture at the International Christian Film and Music Festival, *Vincent's Vow*. Theatre credits include *Mrs Kirby-you Can't Take It With You*, *Cavale - Cowboy Mouth*, and title role in *Gnadiges Fraulein* by Tennessee Williams. She can also be seen and heard in various TV and print ads as well as audiobooks and commercial voice over.

Deborah Madick holds a BFA in performance from Missouri State University, studied Meisner Technique with Tanya Berezin at MU and studies on-camera and the actors process with acting coach, Andy Garrison. As a former professional ballroom dancer, she brings her love of movement, classic partner dance skills, as well as several dialects, scuba diving and a laughable golf game to her list of skills.

MEET THE COMPOSER

COSTUME & SCORE



Sapphire earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Composition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a Clarinet Performance emphasis and a minor in Business, in May 2022. She began her Master of Science degree in Arts Administration at Boston University.

She's a nerd at heart, loving everything from traditional literature to Dungeons & Dragons to video games. This love for world-creating, combined with her passion for music, drives her to be a composer. Moreover, witnessing the joy her performers experience while interacting on stage further motivates her. This nerdiness also fuels her podcast, "Chatting with Creators!" On the show, she connects composers and musicians in the emerging media arts with students, delving deep into their projects and careers.

She has played clarinet and saxophone in various large and chamber ensembles since middle school. While she continues to study her instruments, composing is her true passion as an artist. During her undergraduate career, she discovered a significant lack of support for grassroots efforts and public policies that promote education and engagement in music. That's why she is pursuing a degree in Arts Administration. As an arts administrator, she has worked with The Lied Center for the Performing Arts, Paladino Media, and The Glenn Korff School of Music. She currently holds positions as a production manager at Emmanuel Music, a teaching artist at Cantata Singers, and a score reader at Boston Baroque.

Currently, she works as a freelance composer, creating compositions for live ensembles as well as for new and emerging media. Some notable recent projects include the score for Western Meadowlark Productions' short film "Moving in Stereo," "Theme in Yellow" commissioned by Dr. Andrew Peck for Renaissance Magnet High School, and "The City of Forget-Me-Nots" featuring Jacob "Average" Johnson and Rhiannon Ling.



Heather Striebel and her team



Anna Kuhlman - Stitcher

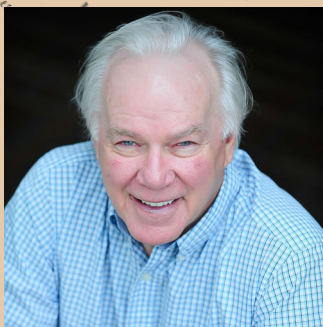


Audrey Foster - Stitcher

MEET THE COSTUME DESIGNER

Heather Striebel is a costume and apparel designer who is currently a Ph.D. Candidate (Apparel Design) within the Textiles, Merchandising and Fashion Design Department at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. She graduated (May 2019) with her M.F.A. in Technical Theatre (Costume Design) from the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film (U. of Nebraska-Lincoln). Previously, she was a high school theatre educator where she established, directed and designed for theater programs at two different secondary schools in Arizona. She has been awarded the Mary Mitchell Fashion Design Award (2020 & 2021) and an ariZoni (Zoni) Award for Best Costume Design for Theater Works' production of *The Little Mermaid* (2019). Previous design credits include showings at Project FUNway (Lincoln, NE) and Omaha Fashion Week (2018-2020), *The Bell Affair* (Film), *Violet* (Glenn Korff School of Music), *Mother Courage* (Nebraska Rep), *The Little Mermaid* (Theater Works), *The Serpent* (Nebraska Rep), *This Random World* (U.N.L.) among many others. See more about Heather Striebel at www.hscostumedesigns.com

FULL CAST



Don White
as Robert Armstead



John L. Shortt
as Reuben Crandall



John Leonard Harris Sr.
Doxology Narrator



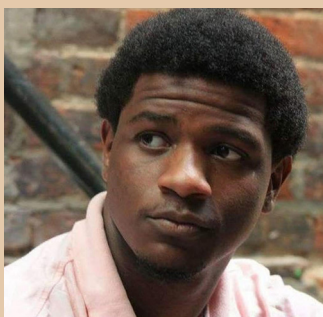
Colby Coash
as Roger B. Taney and Appraiser



Melinda Simonsen
as Ann Key Taney



Christian Velez
as Constable H B Robertson



Malik Fortner
as Foundry Worker



Shea Butler
as Foundry Worker 2



Matthew Kischer
as Witness 1



Mary Rogers
as Woman 2



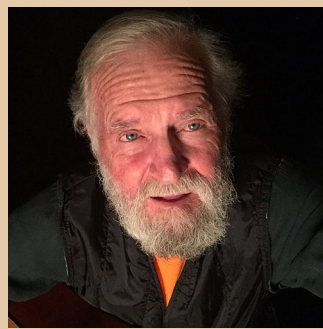
Mary White
as Woman 3



Katie Otten
as Nurse Witness



Joseph Palmateer
as George Naylor



Larry Woods
as Richard Butt



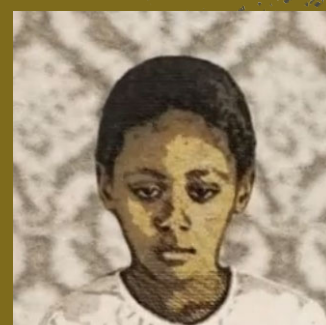
Paul Kandarian
as John J Dermott



Rick Daniels
as Joseph H Bradley



Steve Kennevan
as Richard Coxe



Zahir Hill Jr
as Daniel Bell Jr



Daniel Nufer
as Constable Madison



Kimba Clemmons
as Joe Thompson



Japrice Green
as Foundry Worker 1



Za'Maya Hill
as Caroline Bell



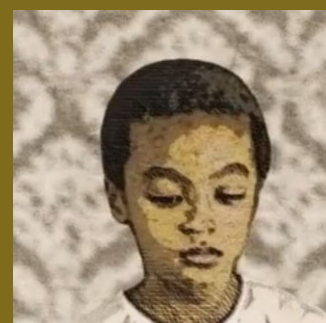
Jarod Cernousek
as White Guard



Kyle Ament
as Judge William Cranch



Brenna Howell
as Woman 1



Zamir Hill
as George Bell



Tony A Grizzel
as Slave Trader 1



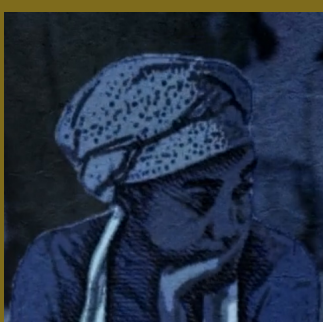
Patrick Lescarbeau
as White Male Nurse



Jason Iannone
as Slaveholder's Attorney



Zaria Hill
as Catherine Bell



Kailyn Desir
as Mary Ellen Bell



Arielle Desir
as Eleanora Bell

Meet the Producers



Left to right: Kwakiutl L. Dreher: Director and Co-Writer, William G. Thomas III: Historian and Co-Writer, and Michael Burton: Supervising Producer and Art Director



Director & Writer Kwakiutl L Dreher

Kwakiutl L. Dreher is a screenwriter, actor, director, playwright, and author. A native of South Carolina, she writes about African American literature, film, visual, and popular culture. She is the author of *Dancing on the White Page: Black Women Entertainers Writing Autobiography* (SUNY Press) and numerous articles and essays. Dreher wrote and acted in *Anna* (2018). She has also played Mamie Till in *Anne & Emmett*, Mrs. Harriet Gottlieb in *Dead Man's Cellphone*, and Louise in the film *The Eyes of Isabelle*. Her one-woman show, *In A Smoke-Filled Room, Color Matters*, was a playlab selection at the Great Plains Theater Festival in 2013 after its theatrical debut at The Haymarket Theater in Lincoln, Nebraska. A storyteller at heart, she has written and recorded stories for public radio. Dreher is currently at work on a murder mystery set in her hometown, Columbia, South Carolina. She is an Associate Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Nebraska.



Historian & Writer William G. Thomas III

William G. Thomas III is an award-winning historian, author, and film producer. A native of Alexandria, Virginia, he writes about American history, law, the U.S. South, and the Civil War. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a Lincoln Prize Finalist. His recent book, *A Question of Freedom: The Families Who Challenged Slavery from the Nation's Founding to the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 2020), won the 2021 Mark Lynton Prize. A digital media historian, Thomas was co-editor of the acclaimed digital project, *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War*. He has published essays in the *American Historical Review*, *Civil War History*, *Southern Spaces*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Thomas is the Angle Chair in the Humanities and Professor of History at the University of Nebraska. He was co-founder and director of the Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia. He is currently writing a narrative about the on-the-ground experience of Reconstruction.



Michael Burton is a digital artist and animation producer. Burton combines art, film, and animation to create historically based stories. He has produced several hybrid-animation shorts including *Gold Slipper* by Willa Cather (2020), *Anna* (2018), and *the Diary of Michael Shiner* (2023). Burton produced and animated the feature film *The Bell Affair* (2022). Burton's digital artwork has been featured across the country and in solo exhibitions at the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska, the Denver Art Museum, RISD Art Museum, Joslyn Art Museum, Digital Graffiti in Alys Beach, Florida, and the Sheldon Art Museum. Burton's recent solo exhibition of digital art and NFTs titled *Dance Floor of the Sky* was hosted at Kiechel Fine Art.

Burton has completed animations for a PBS documentary titled *On a Knife's Edge*, which premiered on *America ReFramed* in 2017. His projects were funded by The National Endowment for the Humanities, Maryland Humanities, ITVS, NET television, The Willa Cather Foundation, and Vision Maker Media. He has worked in digital media for over 20 years recently serving as Director of the Cube Art Project, a biannual juried international digital art competition.

Supervising Producer & Art Director Michael Burton

Film Stills

Download 60 images here



Left to right: Rick Daniels, Steve Kennevan



Left to right: Bryan Hurst, Michael Zandov, Anthony Wilcox

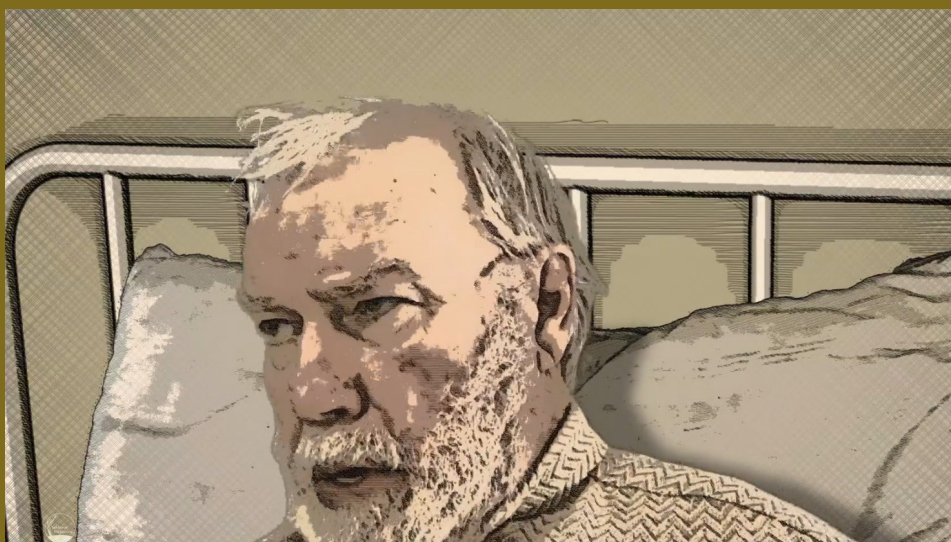


Christian Velez

PROMOTIONAL IMAGES



Myeisha Essex



Don White



Darla Davenport

Production Stills



Left to right: Myeisha Essex, Anthony Wilcox, Arista Jackson, Darla Davenport



Left to right: Wayne Matychuck, Rick Daniels, John L. Shortt, Steve Kennevan



Deborah Madick

Actors in Their Own Homes



Left to right: Myeisha Essex, Anthony Wilcox, Arista Jackson, Darla Davenport



Wayne Matychuk



Deborah Madick