



Dartmouth Week

Playwright brings history of Paul Cuffe to the stage at Dartmouth farm

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Aug 18, 2023



Playwright and director Samuel Harps addresses and thanks the crowd following the performance. Photos by Sean Flannelly
The actors have rehearsed over Zoom since February, but not met until last night.



The cast and director pose with descendants of Paul Cuffe. Jeffrey Starr played Paul Cuffe, an African-American

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Lead actor Jeffrey Starr breaks character to explain that the play is still in active development and his lines are not memorized, sending the crowd into applause. The cast gathers on stage for the final scene.



Against the warm wooden walls and rafters of Round the Bend Farm's event hall, the history of famed African-American and Native American abolitionist Paul Cuffe came to life.

The play, "Paul Cuffe: In Search of a New Land," was written by New York playwright Samuel Harps, who has been working on the script for years and is currently on his "third rewrite," he said after the performance.

The play is still in active development. The Aug. 17 production, sponsored by Westport Historical Society, was seen by a packed house, but it was a rehearsal of sorts, and featured a team of actors that had never met in person.

Born on Cuttyhunk Island as the child of emancipated slave Cuff Slocum and Native American Ruth Moses, Paul Cuffe became one of the richest African-Americans in the United States through the shipping business he created with his brother-in-law Michael Wainer.

While Cuffe's life spanned five decades, Harps' play narrowed in on his effort to shuttle free slaves to Sierra Leone, and told the story of his interactions with those families.

Speaking to the crowd after the performance, Harps said he discovered Paul Cuffe in 2017 at the Westport Friends Society, when someone noticed him looking at a book about Paul Cuffe and invited him back to see Cuffe's grave.

"In finding out who [Cuffe] is, I found so much out about myself and my own history," Harps said. "This story is a part of my heart now."

Westport Historical Society has supported the play for years. Last September, the play was performed for a crowd at DeDee Shattuck Gallery in Westport, and Harps said he'll be back on the South Coast again next year.

Both years, descendants of Paul Cuffe attended the show.

"This year, from last year, it's like 100% better," said Chief Robert Two Running Elks Cox, seventh nephew of Paul Cuffe. "It was 100% last year but it's 100% better this year."

Cox, who's also known by Nij-Pajikwat-Mo 'z as a member of the Pocasset Wampanoag Tribe of the Pokanoket Nation, said it was great to see that people were interested in the history, as evidenced by the sold-out show.

"We know the family history, but to have other people excited about the family history is wonderful," Cox said.

David Root, from Westport, said he knew some of Cuffe's history, but the Sierra Leone aspect was new to him.

"I think it was a wonderful enterprise and I'm very proud of an understanding of Paul Cuffe and the role that he plays he

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As the play is still being developed, performances were unfinished too. Notably, lead actor Jeffrey Starr read his lines from a sheet onstage and occasionally paused for long periods. During one such moment, Starr broke character to apologize to the crowd, explaining that the play is still in production and he has "an enormous number of lines." Indeed, Cuffe speaks in nearly every scene, often for extended periods of time. The crowd erupted into applause following the explanation by Starr.

"It was a great subject and the performance definitely has tremendous elements to it," said Sam Mullin. "As the playwright said, it's still a little rugged, but it's got tremendous potential."

Harps said he's looking forward to working on the play more and having another performance next year.

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