

Michael Bradford's powerful (if a tad bloated and meandering) Civil War-era drama gets an enthusiastic treatment by director and set designer Jahi. It's clear from the get-go that he fully committed to the details—every costume, set piece, light change and song selection feels reverential and authentic. His personal stamp here is so noticeable, you might imagine him pacing around a room filled with scribbled stage notes, trying to pack in as much zest—graceful physical movements, live musical accompaniment, snappy time shifts—as he can muster. But a question still hovers over these moves: How can a play with this much heart feel like it's going through the motions?

Isaiah (played with wide-eyed buoyancy by Kitt) returns to see his lover Sarah (Brinkley) after a 12-year separation. Yes, they're no longer slaves, but Isaiah opts to take his freedom to wipe away all the memories of slavery (he changed his last name to "Freeman"); Sarah knows better.

Things start off lightly, even sweetly, with the reunited couple giving an amusing back-and-forth. (Sarah uses the phrases "open up a gate" and "get up in my yard" after they spend the night together.) Then it's revealed that Sarah was raped by their master, and Isaiah was very much that master's pawn. Meanwhile, the ghost of a lynched friend haunts Isaiah. It's an interesting study in coping with atrocity, but shifts into the horrific are shaky. With an inordinate number of similarly tempered monologues, the compelling subject matter just doesn't, well, compel.