

Black Angels

by Gayle Jessup-White - November 16, 2016

The group of nine young men, most of them African-American, radiated star-quality as they strutted through Monticello's David M. Rubinstein Visitor's Center and headed toward the site's African-American graveyard. And no wonder—it turned out that they were New York actors in Charlottesville performing the award-winning play “Black Angels Over Tuskegee.”



(<https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/uploaded-content-images/tuskegee2.jpg>).

The creation of playwright, director and actor Layon Gray, “Black Angels” is the fictionalized story of the real-life Tuskegee airmen. Famed for their courage, tenacity and World War II battle successes, the Tuskegee airmen were the first African-American military aviators in the United States Armed Forces.



(<https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/uploaded-content-images/tuskgegee1.jpg>).

“Black Angels’ is the story behind the men fighting for a country that considered them less than human,” said Gray as he and fellow cast members assembled around the African-American gravesite where many of Thomas Jefferson’s slaves are buried, unnamed. “We’re on hallowed ground,” said the show’s narrator, Thaddeus Daniels while looking at rocks that serve as makeshift grave markers and where someone had placed flowers.

The cast has traveled all over the country since “Black Angels” premiered off-Broadway in 2010. They were at Charlottesville’s Paramount Theater (<http://www.theparamount.net/>) in October for three performances in a single day - two of them for school-age children. Gray said they try to visit historical landmarks wherever they travel. “Of course, we had to come to Monticello,” he said.

What Gray couldn't have known is that a participant in *Getting Word* (<https://gettingword.monticello.org/>), Monticello's oral history project about descendants of Monticello's slaves, was a decorated Tuskegee Airman. Colonel James T. Wiley (<https://gettingword.monticello.org/people/james-t-wiley/>), flew more than 100 missions over Southern Europe and earned the Air Medal.

As the men studied the gravesite, they considered the parallels between the treatment of Thomas Jefferson's slaves and the Tuskegee airmen. "The thought was all men were created equal," said Gray recalling Jefferson's words, "but not treated equally... the Tuskegee airmen had to overcome so many obstacles to prove they were equal. The same thing happened here" with Monticello's enslaved community, he said.

The day after their sold-out performances, which kicked off the Paramount's art education season, the actors returned to Monticello to visit Jefferson's architectural masterpiece. "It's beautiful," said Daniels, "and humanizes Jefferson."



(<https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/uploaded-content-images/tuskegee3.jpg>).

Cauline Yates, a descendant of Monticello slaves and a *Getting Word* participant, saw the play and joined the cast during their house tour. “They made me feel as if I was experiencing the real Tuskegee Airmen and their courage to overcome every obstacle,” she said, adding, “We are still facing too much discrimination today.”

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