

Oil and Water

a new play by Robert Chafe

Score by Andrew Craig

Directed by Jillian Keiley

Musical Direction by Kellie Walsh

An Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland Production



PETRIIA BROWLEY PHOTO: PAUL DALY

A Guide to the Play

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What this Guide has to Offer

This study guide is useful for anyone who would like to deepen their understanding of Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland's world premiere production of *Oil and Water*.

This play is a theatrical retelling of the incredible true story of Lanier Phillips. Shipwrecked aboard the USS Truxton in 1942, Mr. Phillips was the only African American survivor. What happened to this son of the racially segregated south at the hands of the residents of the nearby town of St. Lawrence forever altered his world, and became a legendary story that still resonates with power nearly 70 years later.

We have assembled a few articles pertaining to the play and a numerous questions intended to encourage thoughtful discussion.

Enjoy!

Clare Preuss
Assistant Director

Lanier Phillips

Lanier Phillips was born on March 14, 1923 in the rural American town of Lithonia, Georgia. In 1941, America entered the Second World War and Phillips decided to join the Navy. He completed boot camp when he was 18 years old and was assigned to the destroyer USS Truxtun. The US Navy was still racially segregated during the war, and racist attitudes and policies flourished. African Americans were only allowed to serve as mess attendants and their duties included washing dishes, shining shoes, laundering clothes, and tidying rooms that belonged to officers. During meals, only white people were permitted to sit at tables in the mess hall; black enlistees ate in a small pantry where they were not even given chairs - they had to eat standing up, separated from their crewmates.

Phillips's first voyage onboard the Truxtun brought him to Iceland. When the destroyer docked, however, he could not go ashore because local authorities would not allow black recruits on Icelandic soil. In 1942, Phillips made a second trip aboard the Truxtun, this time to the island of Newfoundland, which lay off Canada's east coast. The destroyer departed Boston on February 15 and met up with two other vessels off the coast of Maine - the USS Wilkes, a destroyer, and the USS Pollux, a supply ship.

A fierce storm pelted the convoy as it steamed toward Newfoundland and forced all three vessels to go aground off the island's south shore in the early hours of February 18. Phillips, like most recruits, was sleeping below deck when the Truxtun ran aground. With their ship breaking up beneath them, the 156 men aboard the Truxtun had to somehow make it to shore in a raging winter storm. "I watched men being washed overboard with the waves and I watched men trying to swim and tossed on the rocks," Phillips later told author Cassie Brown, who wrote a novel about the disaster called *Standing into Danger*.

Still, Phillips felt his best chance of survival was to leave the ship and head for a rocky beach, which lay about 250 yards from the Truxtun. A raft was about to depart for the coast and he decided to climb aboard. "I was talking to three other black messmen and one Filipino. They assured me that if I would get in the water I would surely die. I said I would not stay aboard a ship and freeze as I was covered with ice from the spray of the ocean. I could see the fence on top of the cliff after daybreak and I told them that there surely must be a village or farm beyond the cliff."

But his companions would not leave the destroyer - they were afraid that if they made it to town, the local white residents would lynch them. Undeterred, Phillips got into the raft and departed for shore, hoping the small vessel would somehow carve a safe path through the violent waters and jagged rocks that lay ahead. Phillips was by now in a semi-conscious condition and only vaguely aware of what was happening. "I remember going over the cliff and seeing the shed, but it seems to me that just before I reached the village with the houses in sight I passed out and I recall someone putting me on a sled," he later remembered.

The sled took Phillips to Iron Springs Mine, which had been turned into a makeshift hospital by the St. Lawrence residents. Phillips fell under the care of Violet Pike, who bathed him in warm water and rubbed life and feeling back into his frozen limbs. Pike then took the exhausted sailor into her own home, where she and her family nursed him back to health during the night that followed. Phillips was stunned. Never before had white people treated him with respect and kindness, yet here he was, eating dinner with his white hosts, who clearly thought that his life was not only worth saving, but was no less important than their own. It was a moment of awakening for Phillips, who later said the humanity shown to him in St. Lawrence changed his entire philosophy of life – it gave him dreams and ambitions; it gave him a newfound sense of self-worth; and it made him realize that he could shape his own future.

Once Phillips recovered, he returned to the United States and began to fight the racial discrimination that had oppressed him since childhood. Tired of shining shoes and washing dishes as a mess attendant, Phillips decided to apply to the Navy's sonar school and become a technician. Change, however, would not come easily. The Navy rejected Phillips's application simply because he was black. Undeterred, Phillips continued to press for admission. He wrote Congressman Charles Diggs – the first African American elected to Congress from Michigan – and received from him a letter of recommendation. With a US Congressman on his side, Phillips was finally admitted to sonar school. Still, he received little support from his fellow servicemen and was even offered a bribe by a Navy counselor to abandon his studies. If he left sonar school, Phillips was promised a promotion to chief steward mess attendant. He declined and went on to become the Navy's first black sonar technician in 1957.

After 20 years of military service, Phillips retired from the Navy in 1961 and cultivated a successful civilian career in engineering and sonar technology. He worked as a civil technician for EG&G engineering firm, joined the ALVIN deep-water submersible team, and collaborated with famous marine explorer Jacques Cousteau to develop a deep-sea lighting technology known as the calypso lamp.

He also continued to fight racial discrimination and became active in the civil rights movement. In March 1965, Phillips joined Martin Luther King's historic 54-mile march from Selma, Alabama to the state's capital city, Montgomery. The demonstration encompassed three separate marches and its goal was to secure equal voting rights for African Americans. About 600 people joined the first march, which took place on March 7. However they only walked six blocks before state troopers and local police assaulted them with clubs and tear gas. Two days later, King led about 2,500 people on a second march across those same six blocks as a show of solidarity and protest. Finally, on March 21, about 8,000 men and women assembled in Selma for a third march that would last five days and take them to Montgomery, Alabama; Lanier Phillips took part in that demonstration.

In the coming years and decades, Phillips continued to speak out against discrimination and oppression. He has travelled all over North America on numerous lecture tours and his audiences have included schoolchildren, university and college students, military personnel, and the general public. He also stayed in touch with the people of St. Lawrence, where a playground has been built in his honour. In May 2008, Memorial University of Newfoundland gave Phillips an Honorary Doctor of Law Degree for his resistance to and capacity to rise above repression.

Phillips visited St. Lawrence for the last time in February 2012 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the *Pollux* and *Truxtun* disaster. He died one month later, on March 12, 2012, at a military retirement home in Gulfport, Mississippi, just two days before his 89th birthday. Today, Phillips is widely remembered as a hero and a civil rights role model. In St. Lawrence, he is also remembered as a friend and a well-loved member of the community.

Source:

<http://www.mun.ca/mha/polluxtruxtun/lanier-phillips/>

A History Black Service Men in The Navy WWI and WWII

In *Oil and Water*, the young Lanier Phillips joins the navy with the hope of escaping the brutal racism of his youth in Georgia. What he finds though is a world that is not much better. As a black man serving in the Navy in 1942, Phillips was afforded little room for advancement. The following is a brief history of the service of African American's in World War I and World War II.

With the increased segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching of black Americans at the turn of the century, race became an issue in the U.S. mobilization for World War I. Conscription and voluntarism brought 380,000 Americans of African descent into the wartime army, but 89 percent were assigned to labor units and only 11 percent to the two combat divisions. By 1940, there were only 5,000 black soldiers (2 percent of the force) and five black officers in the army. The navy had been accepting fewer blacks since its changeover from sail to steampower in the later nineteenth century (there were only 441 black sailors in 1934); the Marines continued their all-white policy.

At the outbreak of World War II, America turned to African Americans when it needed more troops. Most of the 900,000 blacks who served in the armed forces in World War II were in segregated units, chiefly in the army (and including black women, who served in segregated units of the WACs and the Army and Navy Nurse Corps). However, wartime demands for increased numbers of service people as well as the ideology of a war against Nazi racism contributed to some integration. The Navy began integrating some fleet auxiliary ships (while most stayed racially segregated throughout the war and beyond). Army units were segregated for most of the war, but beginning with the Battle of the Bulge, when the army suffered shortages of white infantrymen, some 4,500 men from black service units volunteered and formed black platoons in formerly all-white combat companies. Although the Marine Corps accepted a few black recruits, it largely maintained its racial segregation.

Source:

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/10126-AfricanAmericansinthMltry.html>

Desegregation of the School System in Boston

In *Oil and Water* Lanier and his daughter Vonzia are living in Boston. It is 1974, and Vonzia and her African American classmates are being bussed to a neighboring community in an effort to integrate the schools. This story is based in truth. In 1974, years after the official end of segregation, the city of Boston still found itself with white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods, and as a result the city's schools were predominantly white or black. In an effort to address this, the city started bussing students into neighboring communities to go to school. The idea did not sit well with some, and soon enough racial tensions spilled over into violence. The following is an article from Time Magazine from 1975.

TIME MAGAZINE Monday, September 15, 1975

Education: Boston: Preparing for the Worst (excerpts)

Would it be the battle of Boston? Last year, the streets echoed to the sounds of jeers and curses, the crash of bottles and bricks and the clatter of hoofbeats as mounted police charged the rioters. Down the hill from South Boston High School, whites had menaced black students in angry confrontation. Would the scene be repeated? That was the fear of officials in Boston as they completed plans for this week's school opening. "This year we intend to be tough," said Boston Police Commissioner Robert di Grazia. "We don't want that one instance which will set off the rest of the city."

Indeed it would not take much to ignite Boston's racial tensions. Last year (1974) 18,200 of the city's 94,000 public school pupils were bused for desegregation to 80 schools; this week (September 1975) 26,000 will be bused to desegregate 162 schools in almost all parts of the city. White resistance to busing, which boiled over into street battles last year, threatens to be even more organized and volatile this fall. City, state and federal officials plan to counter the threat of violence with a massive show of force, including 1,000 city police, 350 state troopers, 250 state park police and 600 National Guardsmen.

Uniformed police are being stationed inside South Boston High School, at least at first. Plainclothesmen are assigned to patrol the corridors there, at Charlestown High and several other schools. In addition, Boston's school administration has bought 15 weapons detectors—similar to those used in airports—which were placed inside high schools to prevent students from carrying knives, chains and guns to class. Students are being issued identification cards at Southie and several other schools where trouble is expected.

Aside from the threat of violence, Boston school officials are concerned about how many white students will actually attend public schools this year. Last year almost one-fourth of the enrolled students, virtually all of them white, stayed out the entire year.

Leaders of the boycott movement have threatened to expand it this year and to enlarge some storefront "academies"—similar to those that whites established in the South to avoid desegregation—in South Boston, East Boston and Hyde Park. The academies, designed to accommodate 800 students, will charge \$575 tuition. Other white parents are trying to enroll their children in parochial and private schools, most of which are already full, or in suburbs and other school districts where they have relatives

Read more: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917826-2,00.html#ixzz1CkwXDul>

Industrial Disease in the St. Lawrence Fluorspar Mines

In the play, the people of St. Lawrence, while coming to the rescue of the men of the ill-fated SS Truxtun, are actually fighting their own battle as well. Many of the men of the town worked in the fluorspar mine, and many of these men were getting sick. In fact, in the decades following their heroic rescue efforts, many of the rescuers themselves would succumb to lung disease. The following is some information about the mining of fluorspar and the effects it had on the miners of St. Lawrence.

St. Lawrence is located on the southeast coast of the Burin Peninsula. Until the early 1930s, the people of the area survived mainly through a combination of inshore fishing, small-scale farming, and other traditional activities. A tidal wave devastated the area in 1929; 27 people lost their lives, and many along the coast lost their houses, boats, stages and supplies. This added greatly to the hardship already inflicted by the Great Depression and the collapse of the saltfish trade.

In 1931, Walter Seibert visited the town to inspect the fluorspar deposits he had purchased from a St. John's businessman in 1929. Fluorspar is a non-metallic ore which, depending on the proportion of its components, is used in the manufacture of such things as aluminum, glass, and the refrigerant freon. At the time of its discovery, the St. Lawrence deposit was described as the largest in North America. In 1933, the men of the area began the arduous task of extracting and shipping the ore for Seibert's company, the St. Lawrence Corporation of Newfoundland.

Major economic transformations, such as that which took place in St. Lawrence, always carry with them certain costs. One way of life is often eradicated or substantially altered by another, and crises of various kinds arise as people try to cope with rapid change in their economic, social and cultural worlds.

In St. Lawrence, for example, mining meant a fundamental change in how people worked and lived as families. Whereas previously families often worked together in collective enterprises such as inshore fishing or farming, now men and women took on very different roles in the family economy. Indeed, it could be said that the sharp distinction between "work" and "home" arose and was reinforced by industrialization. An industry such as mining is also highly stratified, and divisions of skill and wages are more stark than that, for example, of an inshore fishing economy.

The clearest and most devastating price the people of St. Lawrence, Lawn, Little St. Lawrence, and the surrounding area paid for the apparent prosperity of the mining years, however, was widespread industrial disease and numerous deaths. While the record shows that as early as 1936, miners were concerned that the large amounts of dust generated by drilling and other activities was affecting their health, it was decades before anything was done. The St. Lawrence mines are notoriously wet, and flooding is a constant problem. Luckily, the groundwater suppressed the dust in some areas.

For those exposed to the dust for prolonged periods, however, there was no escaping the consequences. The "dry-drills" which the miners used until the 1940s produced a great deal of dust from which miners had little or no protection. Over time, this "silica dust" accumulates on the lungs and other bronchial areas, and scar tissue builds up. As the

process goes on, breathing becomes more difficult, and lung capacity decreases, until the victim in effect suffocates from a condition known as "silicosis".

While the first case of silicosis was officially confirmed in the late fifties, many had suspected the problem long before that. In 1941, for example, the St. Lawrence Mine Workers' Protective Union asked a government tribunal appointed to settle a strike, to arrange medical examinations to be conducted on the miners. Various levels of government wrangled over administrative responsibility. Many miners, suspected of having tuberculosis, were treated for that disease but died shortly after.

New technologies in drilling and other methods, and a new awareness on the part of the workers and especially the union, did a great deal to eliminate many of the problems associated with dust. In the early sixties, however, the presence of a new and even more deadly enemy was confirmed. It was discovered that miners and ex-miners suffered from an abnormally high incidence of cancer, a condition that could not be explained by exposure to ordinary silica dust. A team of federally appointed experts then confirmed the presence of high levels of radon gas in many underground areas. The gas was apparently released during mining operations, and tended to build up in non-ventilated areas. Efforts were then undertaken to adequately ventilate the mines, to remove the threats of dust and radon gas, and regular air monitoring was introduced. Again, however, for many it was too late.

The lack of medical facilities and accurate record-keeping in the period before the fifties, in addition to the questions raised by the presence of other diseases, such as tuberculosis, make it difficult to say exactly how many miners died from working in the St. Lawrence mines. Taking the official and unofficial estimates together, however, the figure is somewhere between two and three hundred. While their numbers have diminished, ex-miners continue to grow ill and die today.

In 1969, a Royal Commission appointed to investigate and make recommendations on the St. Lawrence situation released its report. The report documented the history of industrial disease in the area, and made some key recommendations concerning safety and compensation. Among them was a call for regular air monitoring, conducted by a team of medical, company, and union representatives, to be carried out every 24 hours. Seeking workers' compensation and widows' benefits has been a long and sometimes frustrating experience for many, and the money received does little to make up for the loss of so many husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. The people of St. Lawrence learned the hard way that the apparent prosperity that comes with industrialization can bring with it a heavy price. The town's two overly large cemeteries bear witness to that fact.

<http://www.heritage.nf.ca/society/stlawrence.html>

Questions for Discussion

1. Lanier Phillips and his daughter Vonzia have endured racism. Have you ever been discriminated against? What were the circumstances? How did you feel?
2. Bergeron came from an environment where he was taught that blacks were worth less than white people. Even though he wasn't consciously racist, there are examples of how he believed himself above his black counterparts. Have you ever witnessed or experienced something like this?
3. When Violet shows care and respect for Phillips, it changes his life for the better. Who accepts you as you are? How does their support make you feel?
4. In St. Lawrence, many men made the choice between a life of fishing and a life in the mines. If given the choice, would you rather work in a mine or as a fisherman?
5. At the top of Act Two, we see Levi praying in his time of need. When life is challenging how do you cope? Do you ever pray or meditate or go for a silent walk?
6. Ena is a photographer and ends up documenting important facts of the disaster through her photography. How can art help us understand a given situation from different angles or with a new focus?
7. Song is an important part of Newfoundland and African American communities. Music helps to bond people in their work and play. Did you have a favorite song in the show? Why?
8. What are the challenges of telling a true story on stage as a play? In what ways do you think the creators of the play succeeded in telling the story and making it theatrical? What could they have done differently?
9. When Vonzia comes home with glass in her hair after being attacked on the school bus, Lanier could have retaliated or gotten angry with the white people who hurt his daughter. How is Lanier a hero for choosing to tell the story of St. Lawrence (the story of universal love) at this pivotal moment in his daughter's life? How do you think his compassionate attitude affected the way she dealt with racism thereafter?
10. When you think of *Oil and Water*, what themes come to mind? How has this play affected your world view?