Zoom into Spanish La Florida with Theater with a Mission (TWAM)

Two hundred years ago, in 1820, Spain ratified the Florida Treaty, setting the stage for Florida to become US territory. This year, with COVID-19 canceling performances and closing theaters all over the Sunshine State, Theater with a Mission (TWAM) is creating new ways to transport people into Florida’s Spanish past, via Zoom.

During TWAM’s Zoom encounters with Spanish La Florida, you can maintain social distancing and still get up close and personal with historic characters. For example: Andrew Jackson played a starring role in Florida’s transition from Spanish *provincia* to US possession. People have been arguing for 200 years about whether Jackson’s role makes him a hero or a villain. So this spring, TWAM has been working with FSU playwright Adaeze Nwigwe to read the letters that Andrew Jackson wrote about his invasions of Spanish territory and develop them into a dramatic scene. The goal is a scene that lets you hear the General who became Florida’s first territorial Governor (then President, and then the face on the $20 bill) talk about Florida’s history in his own words – why he took his highhanded actions in Spanish Florida, what he hoped to accomplish in attacking a nation that was at peace with the USA, and how he felt about the people whose lives he turned upside down.

Playwright Adaeze Nwigwe has an interesting history herself. Her parents immigrated to Florida from Nigeria; her name is pronounced “ah-DAY-zay (which means Princess) WING-way.” She grew up in West Palm Beach, won a place in FSU’s prestigious Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP), and just graduated during FSU’s first-ever virtual commencement. A double major in history and biology, Adaeze discovered a passion for Spanish Florida through an online course with Professor Andrew Frank, an authority on the Seminoles. She decided to put her passion onstage by working with TWAM, spending months locating letters written to and by Andrew Jackson during his controversial forays into Spanish Florida and using these first-person documents to draw an audible portrait of a complex character.

Before COVID-19, Adaeze Nwigwe’s new scene – staged as a high-stakes split-screen exchange of letters between General Jackson and US President James Monroe – was slated for its world premiere during TWAM’s encounter with 1820s Florida at Goodwood Museum & Gardens, called *Florida for Sale*. When protecting the public health made postponing *Florida for Sale* necessary, TWAM decided to experiment with making this encounter virtual. So on April 17, 6 actors, 5 producers, and 1 playwright gathered online to experience this slice of Spanish Florida’s life via Zoom.

The results were a revelation. Actors and auditors alike found themselves captivated by the contrast between Jackson’s tenderness in writing to his wife Rachel – “May the angelic host that rewards and protects virtue and innocence, and preserves the good, be with you until I return” – and his terseness in writing to President Monroe: “the officers of Spain … identified themselves with our enemy.” Newcomers to the field and folks familiar with Florida’s history were all intrigued by President Monroe’s cool-handed approach to managing his hotheaded general, officially writing to Jackson “I shall withhold nothing in regard to your attack of the Spanish posts and occupancy of them, particularly in Pensacola … which may produce the most serious and unfavorable consequences,” while privately telling his Secretary of War, “he is a rash and wild man.  We must make the argument and his actions clear to him.”

April’s Zoom into Spanish Florida was so successful that TWAM is launching a series of Zoom readings in May called TWAM Virtual. Join us, to meet new translations of plays that were written while Spain governed the Sunshine State and new dramatizations of critical junctures in Florida’s transition from Spanish to US. In all these online encounters, you will hear characters from the past pursue life, liberty, and their own particular brand of happiness in their own words.

For detailed schedules and Zoom invitations, visit [www.theaterwithamission.com](http://www.theaterwithamission.com), and follow Theater with a Mission on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Salud!