

# THE AGITATORS

The Story of Susan B. Anthony  
and Frederick Douglass



Written  
by  
Mat  
Smart

Directed  
by  
Logan  
Vaughn

A  
commission  
from Geva  
Theatre  
Center &  
the New  
York State  
Council  
on the  
Arts

**P.L.A.Y. (Performance = Literature + Art + You)**

**Student Matinee Series**

**2017-2018 Season**

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## Dear Educators,

At Geva's first rehearsal of *The Agitators* on September 19th, Director Logan Vaughn shared that she was most eager to dive into exploring Susan and Frederick together: "In school, we're usually taught about them separately, but learning about them together simply makes sense – it's almost like re-shaping history, in a way." Personalizing and humanizing these two iconic figures into real, relatable people, and a desire to deeply provoke the audience, guided Logan's vision for *The Agitators*. "I want the audience to leave the theatre feeling fired up and thinking about what they can do to agitate the world today."

*"We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future."* – Frederick Douglass

In the first scene of *The Agitators*, while visiting with Susan at her family's farm, Frederick comments, "I am welcome here, but there is nowhere in America where I am safe." 168 years later, how many marginalized people in our country would think or say the same? A short time later, Susan pleads, "It is 1849! How is this *still* happening?" 168 years later, how many times have you heard a gobsmacked acquaintance bemoan, "It is 2017! How is this *still* happening?"

*"We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future."*

Douglass challenges Susan, and us: "There is only one thing to do. To agitate. Agitate. Agitate. Agitate. Agitation is the spark to the fire of all change. Nothing changes if people are not talking about it. That must come first." He prays, "Give us the strength to fight for each other as much as we fight for ourselves."

It is our sincerest hope that your students will leave the theatre fired up, asking themselves: How can I agitate the world today? Like Susan and Frederick, how can I be a soldier for others' causes, and not just my own? How can I create a 'brilliant agitation'?

At the end of the play, Susan tells Frederick, "There is so much work to be done, and the thought of doing it without you is... – but then I look at the young people around us. When I think of these fine, young agitators – and the countless ones who are not yet born – only one thought fills my heart: Failure is impossible."

It is our young people – the fine, young agitators sitting in these very theatre seats – who will pave the path. We hope, as Susan did, that they will ask themselves – not just figuratively, alone, or in silence, but literally, out loud, and with others – "How can we learn to stay in the room with the people we hate? And who hate us? How can we be better at helping each other see?"

*"There is only one thing to do. To agitate. Agitate. Agitate. Agitate."*

Lara Rhyner



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**College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for middle school and up are available at:**  
<http://www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/>

## Staff

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**Jenni Werner**

Literary Director and Resident Dramaturg

**Mark Cuddy**

Artistic Director

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## Background at the Forefront

*“In The Agitators: The Story of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, we meet two of our country’s fiercest advocates for freedom and equality. We first encounter them before the Civil War, at a time when it was unheard of for women to speak in front of an audience that included men, and when black men and white women spending time together likely spelled trouble. Anthony and Douglass dedicated their lives to breaking the barriers held in place by racial and gender biases, and to pushing the United States ever closer to that dream of equality for all its citizens. Small wonder they are revered across the country, and adored here in their hometown of Rochester.”* – Jenni Werner, Literary Director and Resident Dramaturg, Geva Theatre Center

### Synopsis

*The Agitators* tells of the enduring, yet tempestuous, friendship of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass. Great allies; but also great adversaries. Young abolitionists when they met in Rochester in the 1840s, they were full of hopes, dreams, and a common purpose. As they grew to become the cultural icons we know today, their movements collided and their friendship was tested. This is the story of their 45-years of friendship – from its beginning in Rochester, through a Civil War, and to the highest halls of government. They agitated the nation, they agitated each other, and – in doing so – they helped shape the Constitution and the course of American history.

### Core Artists



Mat Smart  
(Playwright of  
*The Agitators*)



Logan Vaughn  
(Director of  
*The Agitators*)



Cedric Mays  
(Frederick  
Douglass)



Madeleine Lambert  
(Susan B.  
Anthony)



Jenni Werner  
(Dramaturg and  
Literary Director)

### Time and Location

*The Agitators* is set in approximately ten different locations, from Rochester to Washington D.C., and takes place over the span of 45 years. Consider how this impacts the design elements of the production. How would you accommodate the passage of location and time if you were designing this play? Be sure to check out the back of the guide for insights into the design process!

**Visit**  
<https://www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/> for a timeline of historical events during *The Agitators*.

### Other Characters in the Story

Although we only meet two characters – Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass – onstage in *The Agitators*, together they reference over 50 people who were active in shaping them, their movements, and their story. Though physically unseen, the impact of these other characters is deeply felt. ♦

**Visit <http://www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/> to access a list of locations *The Agitators* scenes are set in, as well as a list of other characters that helped shape the stories and movements championed by Susan and Frederick.**

**Are you familiar with, or have you been to, any of the locations the story is set in? Select and research one of the historical characters we do not see onstage, but who impacted the story. What role did they play in *The Agitators*, and in history?**

**Frederick: “Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who want crops without plowing the ground.”**

## Filling in the Blanks of Our History: An Interview with the Playwright

**Jenni Werner (Literary Director/Resident Dramaturg):** Can you talk about the origins of *The Agitators*?

**Mat Smart (Playwright):** A couple of years ago while I was in Rochester working on my play *Tinker to Evers to Chance*, I went on a tour of the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, and the docent mentioned that Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were life-long friends, but they had a big disagreement over the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote – but not women. I couldn't believe that I had never heard that Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were friends! Down the street from the house is Pepsy Kettavong's beautiful statue "Let's Have Tea," which shows Susan and Frederick having tea and talking. I was so moved by the familiarity that the statue invites – where kids can go up and climb on them and pretend to talk to them – that I wanted to investigate their friendship and write about it. We don't know what they said to each other behind closed doors, but we do know that they were often with each other; their families were friends, and they were at the same conventions and meetings frequently throughout their lives. I believe this is a place in history where the playwright is actually quite useful. It's been my job to fill in the blanks based on the facts.



"Let's Have Tea," Pepsy Kettavong's statue of Frederick and Susan outside The Susan B. Anthony Museum & House on Madison Street in Rochester, NY

**JW: Why do you think this is the right time to do that, to try to fill in the blanks?**

**MS:** What scares me most about the political environment now is how it feels like there are two sides, and we're not talking to one another. The distance between people in this country seems to be growing greater and greater. And something that is so inspiring to me about Susan and Frederick was their ability to have a healthy, hard dialogue with the people they disagreed with; with the people who hated them. So I hope a lesson we can take from them is how we can better listen to people who believe different things than we believe, and how we may better agitate the people who disagree with us to change their thinking. Or vice versa. How do we see with someone else's eyes?

**JW: Was it daunting to approach this story?**

**MS:** These are two of the greatest Americans to ever live. So how could I possibly write the words that they would say? How could I possibly get inside their heads? I feel a great responsibility to honor them, but to do so by showing their flaws and humanity. I mentioned Pepsy Kettavong's statue "Let's Have Tea" was an inspiration for me. I had the opportunity to talk to Pepsy, and he said something that really stayed with me about how he approaches his art. He said that he doesn't do "pedestal art." And that what he loved so much about Susan and Frederick was that they were truly about equality, about taking people off the pedestal, so that we all have equal opportunity and equal rights. And so I've really tried to approach the play that way. Also, whenever I've felt stuck, I've gone back to their words. They both spoke and wrote so much, and lived so long, that there's a wealth of material directly from the source.

Susan: "Do you believe this can ever be a country for all?"

**JW: Were there other people that helped you figure out how to get into the story?**

**MS:** Both Frederick and Susan have sentinels that are looking out for them - the experts in the field. I've been lucky enough, both in Rochester and throughout the country, to befriend these sentinels and they've had a huge impact on the work that I've done. Rose O'Keefe wrote a book called *Frederick and Anna Douglass in Rochester*. She showed me around Rochester – some of the sites that were important for Frederick. In her book, there's a little story about a baseball game that Frederick's son played in, in Rochester, and that's become a scene in the play. I wouldn't have thought to have a scene at a baseball game when you're dealing with Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony! But that was a major event in Rochester in August of 1870. John Stauffer wrote an amazing book called *Giants*, a dual biography of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. He really showed me how Frederick had this amazing capacity for forgiveness, and how he believed in the fluidity of self, and the possibility for people to change.

On the Susan B. Anthony side, it was a dream to get to know Deborah Hughes, who's the President of the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, and talk to her very early on in my writing process about who Susan was and the fights she fought, and the more complicated parts of her history – how to make sense of those. And to do that while we were actually at her house, and to be able to look at original letters, original artifacts of Susan's, was a real joy. Lynn Sherr, who wrote the book *Failure is Impossible*, and Ann Gordon, who was the editor of *The Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, were also instrumental in helping me out.

I just wanted to get it right. And these people have really helped me in that endeavor, and I feel indebted to them. It's been one of the most satisfying journeys of my career, to get to know Susan and Frederick through the people who care about them – especially the people in Rochester.

**JW: Are there things that you learned about these two people that surprised you?**

**MS:** The University of Rochester's Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation department has some unpublished letters that Susan wrote late in her life that I got to read, and they're very emotional; they're very sentimental. She had a huge heart. In some of her more political writing, you don't necessarily get that.

Right when I was starting out on this project, I became friends with Luticha Doucette, who works in the Mayor's office and knows a ton about Frederick. I was asking her about Frederick, and what she thought I needed to get right. "Don't leave out his anger," she said. And as I read his writing, his speeches, there really is a ferociousness to him that I think is important to honor. He was on fire about these issues and about fighting for justice. He was so clear-sighted. His anger was a big part of that. What he did wasn't easy, and I think sometimes we can look back at these heroes of our history and think that they were beloved and appreciated in their own times. And they were in some ways. But they made a lot of people very, very upset. It's important not to leave that out.

**JW: Do you have any feeling about what allowed them to have those conversations, and what kept them moving forward?**

**MS:** By all accounts I've read about them, they were incredibly charismatic, magnetic, and inexhaustible souls. They were driven by the belief that this country could live up to its promise. They couldn't let that promise down. I think they were possessed by knowing what was right, and what we could do as a country. They were special and they were brave. That's how they were able to face those crowds that opposed them.

**JW: How has writing this play impacted you? Do you feel that there's a lasting impression that creating this piece of art has made on you?**

**MS:** Absolutely. A lot of what this play is about is vision. And how can we keep opening our eyes wider and wider. The play has become, in some ways, about Susan confronting the gender bias that Frederick may have had, and about Frederick confronting the racial bias that Susan may have had. And in doing that, I've had to confront my own racial and gender biases that I didn't know were there. And that's been a difficult, and challenging, and rewarding process, and one that I'm still working on. But I'm just amazed at how much Susan and Frederick can teach us – if we let them. ♦

Frederick: "Why is it illegal to teach a slave to read? Because words can shine light unto injustice like no other force."

## Carrying on the Legacy: An Interview with the Cast

**Lara Rhyner (Associate Director of Education):** What are some of the excitements and challenges of bringing these iconic characters to life?

**Madeleine Lambert (Susan B. Anthony):** I am incredibly honored to be playing Susan B. Anthony, and thrilled that Rochester is invested in telling her story and building upon her legacy. Before I encountered this play, I was unaware that Susan and Frederick had a dynamic relationship as collaborators. As a student, I had learned about them separately, but I think there is much to be gained in understanding how they agitated and inspired each other.

**Cedric Mays (Frederick Douglass):** There is certainly an amount of sensitivity that I approach this story with; not out of fear or because I am doing this in Mr. Douglass' hometown, but because we all hear the name Frederick Douglass and have opinions about who he is based on what we have learned in history class. The sensitivity that I feel in playing Frederick is that I am trying to get to the stuff that the history books do not quite have access to. I want to know how he felt when he walked through a field and was surrounded by an array of colors and smells. How did he feel when the wind graced his cheek? I want to get beneath my own iconic feelings about him and experience how he felt, and what he thought about being alive.

**LR: What sort of research did you engage in to prepare yourself for the role?**

**ML:** I certainly visited Susan B. Anthony's house; I also went to the public library to look at some of Susan's letters, and made a visit to Mt. Hope Cemetery, where both Susan and Frederick are buried. There is a lot of published content about Susan's life and work; I find her own personal writings to be the greatest source of inspiration. We are also fortunate to have a dramaturg working on this production, which means that there is a remarkable person who focuses on helping us understand the historical aspects of the play. The history of the play is absolutely useful, but at a certain point, I have to put the research aside and focus on how I will bring this story to life.

**CM:** I read the first two of Frederick's autobiographies. I also combed through other biographies that had to do with the relationships he had to different women in his life, and I took violin lessons to prepare to play Frederick, who was a self-taught and dedicated violinist.

**LR: What is the most surprising, interesting, or unexpected insight you discovered?**

**ML:** I am very interested in Susan's arrest for illegally voting in the presidential election on November 5th, 1872. I think about my own legal voting for a female president this past November, and I feel a deep sense of gratitude to Ms. Anthony.

**CM:** This isn't so much surprising as it is more apparent as I have gotten closer to who he is: His ability to surmount the mores of the majority culture that he was born into. Frederick Douglass was born a slave, and did not have access to education, books, fashion, agency, or estate. And when you look at what he did and who he became, it is really, quite honestly, incredible! He, arguably, became one of the most well read, eloquent, dapper, and autonomous men of the 19th century. To put it simply, he came from next to nothing to become the epitome of what the majority culture deemed great!

**LR: What is it like being an active participant in the formation of a new play?**

**ML:** It is thrilling to be working on a new play; it keeps changing at every rehearsal! I find the new play processes to be highly collaborative. We are all in a committed conversation about how to bring this story to life. I imagine that we will be making changes to the script until opening night. It is a very good lesson in patience.

**CM:** It is great to have a playwright in the room! Because this is brand new, we are all constantly asking questions to make sure that we are telling the story that Mat wants to tell, and that honors and challenges our notions of these two great people. With a new play, and in this particular process, we are all working to make sure that this play is worthy of the subjects. I believe that it is!

**Frederick: "And I hope you will never know the depths of hatred that I have seen man descend to."**

**LR:** What are some ways in which this story is still timely and relevant today?

**ML:** I am amazed by the tenacity of Frederick and Susan. They were activists until the day they died. I think we are obligated to carry on their legacy of justice and activism. Make sure your voice is heard – vote! I think often of something Frederick wrote – “We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future.” How do we learn from the past so we can grow and evolve? Of course, Susan’s quote – “Failure is impossible” – is so succinct, and yet so profound. It is a reminder that we have to take risks to bring about change.

**CM:** The time in which Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass lived was special because there was, in the air, the feeling of the pioneer spirit. The people of this time were creating rules as they went along, and had the audacity to believe that what they were doing was worthy of the effort. I think we are living in a time where there are people who are doing bad things, and/or things that only serve a certain percentage of the population (not unlike how the institution of American Slavery, the treatment of women, and various other ills plagued the time of the characters in our story). Indeed, I am sure that Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony knew what they were up against. But they did what they did anyway. If there is something to be gained from this play, I hope that it would be this: The world, and those who will inherit the world that we all share, is worth the effort it takes to do the right thing. ♦

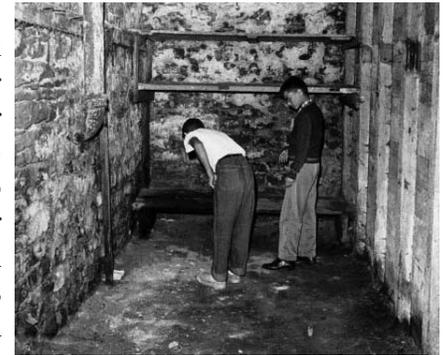
## Rochester in the 19th Century

*The Agitators* begins in 1849 and ends in 1895, a span of nearly 50 years which would encompass the burgeoning abolitionist, suffrage, and temperance movements (all of which would share a significant number of participants), the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction efforts, The Mexican War, the arrival of the Statue of Liberty, and the admittance of 14 new states to the Union. It was also a period when the country began its transition from a rural-based society into a more industrialized and urbanized population, including the growing city of Rochester. During the latter half of the 19th century, Rochester would triple its population and begin to annex portions of a number of surrounding towns, including Brighton, Gates, Greece, and Irondequoit. This period would also see the founding of a number of iconic Rochester businesses, such as Eastman Kodak and Bausch & Lomb. In addition, the city was also the site of the development of several manufacturing industries, as well as a major producer of flour to be shipped throughout the country.

Though not free of the racism that was pervasive throughout the country, Rochester had developed a reputation as one of the country’s more tolerant and politically-progressive cities. In the years leading up to the Civil War, for example, numerous locations in the area were used as safe-houses to shelter fugitive slaves before they were placed on boats (often on the Genesee River) for transport to Canada as part of the Underground Railroad. The city was also instrumental in women’s rights efforts from an early date. The Rochester Women’s Rights Convention, which met on August 2, 1848, was the second such convention in the nation. The Rochester convention elected a woman as its presiding officer, a highly controversial step at the time, that was opposed even by some of the meeting’s leading participants. This convention was the country’s first public meeting, composed of both men and women, to take that step.

Rochester’s reputation was so strong that Frederick Douglass elected to move his family to the city in 1847 and begin his abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. Douglass chose the area for a number of reasons including its active, enterprising, free African-American population, its community of Quakers (including the Anthony family) who embraced abolition and racial equality, and its history of religious and reform movements. There was such a confluence of religious movements in the area, in fact, that it was once referred to as the “burned-over district” because, it was noted, so many people had been religiously converted that there was no more “fuel” (unconverted population) left to “burn” (convert).

Douglass felt at home in Rochester, and would keep his family in the area for nearly 30 years. Even after relocating to Washington, D.C., Douglass still spoke with fondness for the city, stating: “I know of no place in the Union where I could have located at the time with less resistance, or received a larger measure of sympathy and cooperation...I shall always feel more at home there than anywhere else in this country.” ♦



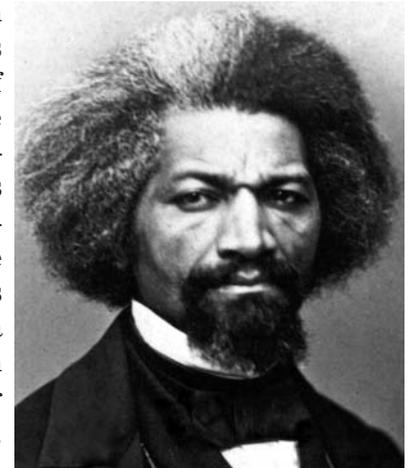
A basement on Troup Street in Rochester that was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad

## Frederick Douglass: Beyond Slavery

It is tempting to think that we are well-versed in the life of Frederick Douglass since many of the achievements of his long and storied career as a writer, publisher, and activist are still frequently referenced and discussed. Much has been written, for example, about *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, the autobiography that chronicles his birth into slavery (in approximately 1818 – records of slave birth dates were often not kept by their owners) and his subsequent escape at the age of 20 by using borrowed documents from a free black sailor in Maryland in order to make his way north in 1838. He would publish two additional autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (in 1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (in 1881), which detailed – among many other highlights – his relocation to Rochester with his wife Anna and their four children. There he established a pro-abolition newspaper (*The North Star*), and would eventually work for the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would state that the rights of citizens to vote cannot be denied “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Douglass would eventually move his family to Washington, D.C. in 1870, where he would reside until his death from heart failure in 1895.

Visit <https://worldhistoryproject.org/topics/frederick-douglass/page/1> for a detailed timeline of Frederick Douglass' life and career.

Despite such a well-documented career, however, there is much about Douglass that is often under-explored. He was, for example, a noted singer and violinist who would often, according to historian and Douglass neighbor Jenny Marsh Parker, serenade neighborhood children who would gather beneath his window on summer nights before “coming to the door and bowing his acknowledgement of their hearty applause.” Douglass was also a great admirer of photography and would rarely turn down a request to sit for a photographer. He would, in fact, frequently seek out photographers, as he believed that widely-circulated images of blacks projecting a sense of strength and confidence was one of the most potent resources for combating negative stereotypes of African-Americans. Douglass sat before so many cameras that he eventually became the most photographed American of the 1800s. Also regularly left out of discussions about Douglass is the series of political appointments he received from a succession of American presidents following the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, a rarity amongst African-Americans of the time – especially former slaves. Douglass would go on to enjoy an audience with nearly every president, beginning with Abraham Lincoln, in the second half of the 19th century.



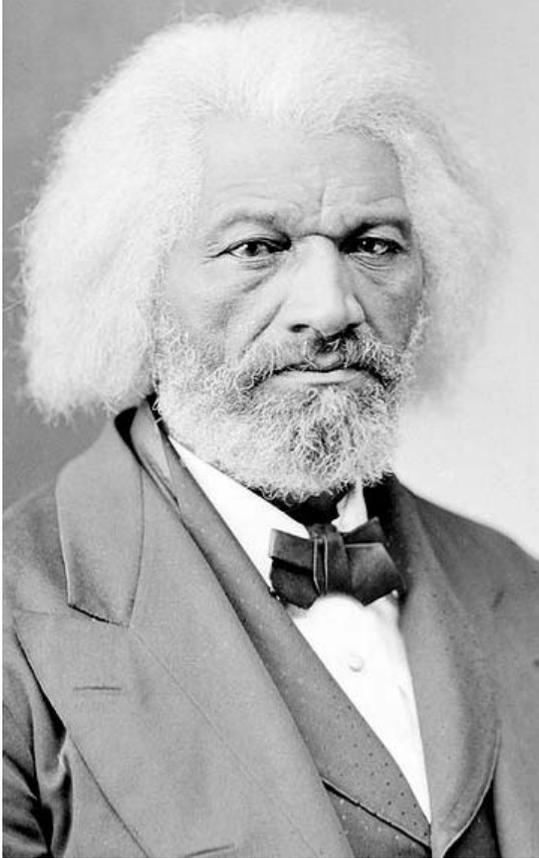
Frederick Douglass, circa 1860s



Frederick Douglass in DC Comics' *Superman: A Nation Divided*

While much has been made of Douglass' gifts as a writer and journalist, such as his use of vivid imagery to enhance his point, a significant portion of his writing was fueled by a deep sense of anger and frustration over the horrors of slavery and the American population's continued reluctance to address the far-reaching results of the practice. “I say,” Douglass wrote, “let him place himself in my situation – wanting shelter, and no one to give it – wanting bread, and no money to buy it – and, at the same time, let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay – I say, let him be placed in the most trying situation – then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave.” And yet, he

Frederick: “Enfranchisement of all is essential if America will ever live up to its promise.”



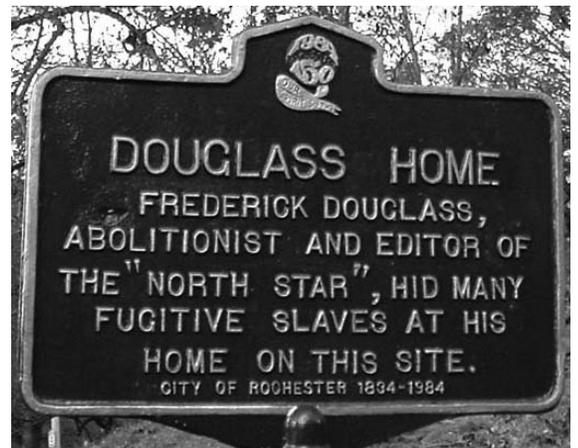
Frederick Douglass, circa 1880s

also repeatedly displayed a capacity for compassion and forgiveness. In late 1857, Douglass corresponded with Hugh Auld, the slave owner from whom he escaped. In the letter, Douglass asks after Auld's children and wife, expresses love for the family, and states that – had they both been free men – Douglass “could have lived with you during life in freedom.”

Douglass' ability to offer forgiveness to those he believed had wronged him was extended not only to those former adversaries but, also, to those closest to him – including Susan B. Anthony, his friend for nearly half a century. While both of them sought the abolition of slavery and believed in suffrage rights for all citizens, they often differed on which tactics to employ – should they use a more confrontational approach, as Anthony sometimes advocated? Or was a more diplomatic method, as Douglass would argue, the better tool? Their points of view came into sharpest contrast over the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Douglass' beliefs were informed by his years as a slave, as well as the difficulties encountered in the north as a free black man, while Anthony's argument grew from her experiences of receiving unequal treatment based on her gender, primarily in matters of political and financial independence. Their division hinged on the wording of the Amendment, as Douglass believed that they could not garner enough political support for both blacks and women to get the right to vote and, therefore, black males should receive suffrage first, at which point they would then begin to tirelessly advocate for suffrage for women. This division would lead to

lengthy periods of stress on their friendship. It would not, however, end the relationship. If anything, it seemingly strengthened it, as Douglass enjoyed the companionship of people who openly challenged him and appreciated the rigors of a good debate.

Douglass' legacy is still felt throughout the country. His quotes are frequently used in the name of social justice causes, his books and essays are often found on required reading lists for students, a number of neighborhoods, parks, and streets have been named in his honor in Boston, Baltimore, and New York City (to name just a few), and Cedar Hill – his former residence in Washington, D.C. – is a registered National Historic Site. Douglass' presence is even more keenly felt in his adopted hometown of Rochester. The Frederick Douglass–Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge, for example, was completed in 2007. The two main concourses at the Rochester International Airport are also named, respectively, for Douglass and Anthony. The Frederick Douglass Community Library was dedicated in March of 2016, as is certainly fitting for a man with such a deep belief in the power of words. The library, as well as the elementary school next to which it stands, were once the site of Douglass' first farmland residence in Rochester, a fact noted by a prominent marker. Douglass' influence, it seems, remains as much a part of Rochester – and American – society as ever. ♦



Marker indicating Frederick Douglass' former residence on South Avenue in Rochester

**Frederick: “As long as there is slavery, the Constitution is a sham. It is nothing but a piece of paper with lies and unfulfilled promise.”**

## Susan B. Anthony: “I Am Greatly Encouraged”

Similar to Frederick Douglass, her friend for nearly fifty years, much is known about the life and accomplishments of Susan B. Anthony, and the facets of her very public work on behalf of (amongst other social and political concerns) women’s suffrage and the abolition of slavery. There is a large body of work documenting Anthony’s tireless push for the rights of all citizens to have a say in the creation and implementation of the laws that govern them. Anthony’s upbringing in the Quaker faith, which stressed the principle, said Anthony biographer Rheta Childe Dorr, “that there is no sex in souls [and] that Quaker women had a voice and a vote in secular matters affecting the congregations” would significantly influence Anthony’s work. Much has also been written and discussed regarding Anthony’s participation in the temperance movement of the late 1840s and early 1850s. It was at a Sons of Temperance convention in Albany where, as Anthony rose to speak, she was told by a male member that she and the other women had been “not invited there to speak, but to listen and learn.” This experience would lead to Anthony’s ardent belief that only by securing an equal say at the ballot box would women truly be heard by male legislators, thus resulting in full political and economic power for women – a goal she would work towards until her death from heart disease and pneumonia in 1906.

Visit <http://susanbanthonyhouse.org/her-story/biography.php> for a detailed timeline of Susan B. Anthony’s life and career.

In spite of the significant amount of documentation regarding Anthony’s social and political efforts, many details of her life are not frequently afforded as much attention. Unlike Douglass, for example, who was separated from his mother and siblings at a very early age as a result of their enslavement, Anthony enjoyed a close relationship with her immediate family – a situation which would create a source of strength from which she would draw support over the years. Part of the family’s closeness came from their experience with bankruptcy following the loss of their once-successful textile mill, as a result of the financial panic of 1837. Anthony was not only impacted by the family’s economic ruin but, also, by the knowledge that even though money had been left to her mother Lucy as an inheritance, she was unable to access it by law. Instead, Lucy’s brother Joshua claimed the money and used it to buy

back some of the items lost by Anthony’s family in the bankruptcy. This lack of monetary independence instilled in Anthony a fervent belief that “woman must have a purse of her own” if she was to enjoy true freedom. The reference to a purse might also be considered a nod to Anthony’s preference for fine clothing and accessories (such as her famous alligator purse), when she could afford it. Her insistence on financial liberation was equally informed by her time as a school headmistress, where she discovered that her compensation was only 25% of what was offered to male teachers at the same school for comparable duties.



Akira Beard’s portrait of Susan B. Anthony as Wonder Woman

Anthony’s need for her unfettered independence could be seen from a young age. She was an early and voracious reader who could write by the age of five and demanded, a few years later, to be taught long division – a technique thought too advanced for women at the time. These desires were encouraged in the Anthony household, particularly by her father who, wrote Dorr, “believed in giving sons and daughters the same advantages. In Susan, he saw ability of a high order and that same courage, persistence, and aggressiveness which entered into his own character, [and] gave her financial backing when necessary, moral support upon all occasions, and was ever her most interested friend and faithful ally.” Anthony’s family’s support would play a crucial role in her work, as she often traveled alone under inhospitable conditions (such as speaking in rural areas about abolition and suffrage, where she often functioned as the day’s sole entertainment for the locals – frequently receiving verbal abuse for her efforts).

Anthony could also exhibit a reckless streak; she regularly set out on speaking tours without sufficient funds to sustain her, or established plans for a place to rest along the way.

Susan: “It may be 1849, but most men, however enlightened, find the idea of a woman giving a public speech repugnant.”



Susan B. Anthony in 1855

For all of Anthony's work, and the many organizations to which she belonged, she seldom held a top position, usually assuming supporting or administrative roles. She believed that her gifts for engagement were best suited for the needs of advancing her causes in a more direct and one-on-one (or one-on-a-crowd, as was often the case) fashion. Anthony understood that ending slavery and securing the vote for free African-Americans and women were such monumental societal changes that they might only occur incrementally and, as a result, she developed a strategy of asking for what she wanted, accepting the invariably compromised counteroffer, and using the small gains as building blocks for the next advance.

While Anthony's family provided a great source of comfort to her, she elected to remain unmarried (a rarity for the time), choosing, instead, to forgo her own romantic possibilities in order to combat the notion that the "conditions of life, which any man of spirit would sooner die than accept, are not only endurable to woman, but are

needful to her fullest enjoyment." Her decision was not, however, due to a lack of options, as Anthony had a number of suitors over the years and contemplated several marriage proposals. Part of Anthony's decision may have been based on the fact that, had a marriage resulted in children, she would have had little legal say in how they were raised, as was common for the time. After being told by a minister that she was "too fine a physical specimen of woman to be doing such work as this; You ought to marry and have children," Anthony replied that it was "a much wiser thing to secure for the thousands of mothers in this state the legal control of the children they now have, than to bring others into the world who would not belong to me after they were born."

Not unlike Douglass, her friend and sometime adversary, Anthony was a firm believer in the power of discussion when she encountered people whose beliefs and opinions differed from her own. This preference for debate and conversation, however, would be tested throughout her life and career but, perhaps, not more so than in her disagreements with Douglass over the wording, and subsequent passage, of the Fifteenth Amendment, which would prohibit the denial of voting rights to any American citizen "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Anthony and her supporters lobbied vociferously for the Amendment's protective language to include gender as well. Douglass, although a vocal supporter of women's suffrage, contended that while "woman has as good a right as we have to the exercise of suffrage, we cannot grant, even as a matter of rhetoric or argument, that she has a *better* claim to it." Anthony's counter for voting rights for all was equally strong: "Men, their rights, and nothing more; Women, their rights, and nothing less." Following the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, Douglass and Anthony continued their friendship, which included several periods of strained relations. Anthony, despite her deep disappointment in its wording, was still heartened by the advances that had been made, stating that "the grandest work that a mortal can accomplish is to get talking, and thereby stir people up to do something. You don't think much of this talking; I tell you it makes everything in the world. First comes talk, then in due time will come action and revolution. After twenty years of earnest work in this cause, I am greatly encouraged." ♦



Susan B. Anthony in 1898

**Susan: "This country is being reconstructed – as we speak. People are ready for change."**

## “Your Skin Will Keep You Safe”

While *The Agitators* concludes in 1895, many of the concerns and opinions expressed by Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass in the story remain relevant in 2017. Consider the moment in the play, for example, when Anthony touches Douglass’ hand in public as a gesture of friendship. Douglass’ reaction is one of concern for their safety, particularly his own, as the move ran counter to the social dictates of many white people of the time. When Anthony protests, he counters by informing her that, even though it is a potentially dangerous situation for both of them, as a white woman, “your skin will keep you safe.” He, however, can make no similar assumptions. To modern sensibilities, Anthony’s innocent gesture seems completely unremarkable. And yet, as poet and author Scott Woods noted, “racism is an insidious cultural disease. It is so insidious that it doesn’t care if you are a white person who likes black people; it’s still going to find a way to infect how you deal with people who don’t look like you.”



A protester at a Black Lives Matter rally in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 2016  
(Note the Frederick Douglass quote on his shirt)



A protester at the Women's March in Washington, D.C. in 2016

Equally pertinent in today’s world is Anthony’s concern over the basic safety of women. A frequent solo traveler, Anthony – in an attempt to convince Douglass of the urgency of her worries – asks “How many women do I know – black and white – who have been beaten and raped without recourse? Open your eyes! We cannot protect ourselves without the vote. Our bodies are objects, constantly under attack. If we say anything, *we* are ostracized. *We* are blamed. It is life and death for women as well.” Anthony’s words continue to reverberate with women today, as author and professor Tressie McMillan Cottom agrees that she “get[s] how it can be news to some of you that people are victimized by systems legitimated by your nation, countrymen, and God. But I’m black, and female, and southern. I call that Tuesday.” Beyond the need for safety, Anthony’s desire to simply be acknowledged and heard speaks to many modern women as well. “On the surface, we – as American women – are independent, free, and mobile,” wrote author Lisa See, “but at our core we still long for love, friendship, happiness, tranquility, and to be heard.”

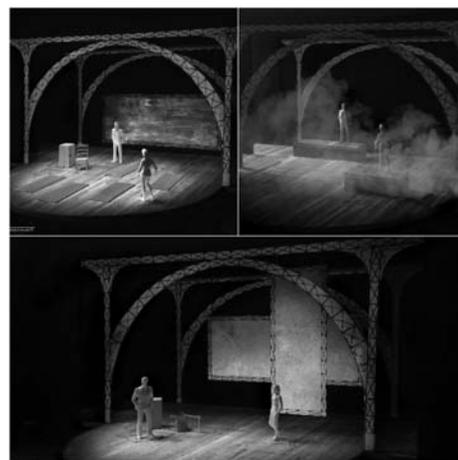
Consider some of the other issues raised in the play. Are they still present in 2017? How do you think Douglass and Anthony would have approached them today? ♦

## “The Artistic Aesthetic Itself Agitates”

*“Frederick continues to play [the violin]. Amidst the ashes, a flower grows. It blossoms. It is a brilliant purple. The purple almost glows. There is a cold gust of wind. Snow begins to fall. The flower wilts and dies. The snow covers it. The snow covers the burnt remains of the house. The sound of a whip lashing.”*

Perhaps it is this vivid clip of text in the stage directions of *The Agitators* that, in part, stirred director Logan Vaughn to recall the oil paintings of artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and seek visual and emotional inspiration for the production from them. “Lynette’s paintings of fictional black subjects depicted in ways we don’t normally see black figures existing outside of the constraints of specific time or space, juxtaposed by glorious, saturated backgrounds, set the tone for the design of the show,” explained Vaughn. “Lynette’s artistic aesthetic itself agitates; it pops and moves in a way that is graphic, modern, and striking in creating pictures that are just a little bit abstract. You’ll see this reflected in both the set and costumes.”

Vaughn continued, “Scenes in *The Agitators* take place in many different locations, across many different times. To accommodate this, the outside framework of the set is styled in the likeness of an old train station. Metaphorically, this speaks to the mobility of the play, and how these characters are always moving forward – progressively, physically, intellectually – they are constantly evolving and moving; they never stop. The upstage and downstage portals of the set will light up and hold the years and locations, like a time stamp. The large primary backdrop and two smaller vertical and horizontal drops will house canvases that will be saturated with paint and light – graphic, with big swipes of vivid color, in the style of Lynette’s paintings; simple, but evocative and full of emotion. Additionally, an elevator for vertical depth and a track for horizontal travel allow us to play with up and down and side to side motion. These keep the story moving, literally and figuratively. When it comes to the music, Composer Juliette Jones (like Frederick Douglass) is a violinist, but also a modern musician. We worked to create a very ‘now’ sound, but with elements of the classic. The sound of this production is lifted and exciting.”



Set model by Scenic Designer  
Jack Magaw



Oil paintings by artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

it’s so weird! Lynette’s style, when applied to costumes, helped us create Susan and Frederick’s looks in a way that is buoyant, fresh, and modern. The costumes work within the constructs of the time period, but feature brilliant pops of colors that agitate the standard...and these two people agitated in every way, even in their aesthetic. They wanted to be distinct; happily outside the status quo or norm. They made sense together. Susan herself was quite an iconic fashionista in her own right, with her statement red shawl and renowned alligator purse. She even dyed her own clothing while on the road. Frederick is described as having a ‘brilliant mane of hair.’ Tackling Frederick’s hair, which is like a character in and of itself, was definitely something we had to contend with. Another interesting challenge of this production was the need to age these characters across the span of nearly 46 years, but to do so with a fluid and quick approach that keeps the play moving.” ♦

Costume Designer Jessica Ford added, “This is my favorite period to design costumes for; when you examine the shape and function of the clothing itself,



Costume renderings by  
Costume Designer Jessica Ford

## A Timeline of Developing *The Agitators*

Like any new play, *The Agitators* has had a long and winding road of development, from inspiration to the stage. From a spark of an idea to Opening Night, it took about three and a half years for Mat Smart to develop his play about Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass' friendship. Explore the process of commissioning and writing a world premiere play in our timeline below.

### Spring 2014

Mat Smart premieres his play *Tinkers to Evers to Chance*, about a family's love of the Chicago Cubs, at Geva Theatre Center. To better acquaint Mat with the Rochester area during his stay, Geva's Literary Director Jenni Werner shares some of Rochester's sights and stories with Mat, including a trip to the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House. Along with many others at the time, Mat is struggling with the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin. Shortly after leaving Rochester, Mat writes to Jenni with an idea for a play – inspired by Douglass and Anthony's friendship – which he hopes might contribute to an important national conversation. Geva loves the idea and secures funding from the New York State Council on the Arts to commission Mat to write the play, as well as a grant from the New York Council on the Humanities to bring Mat to Rochester to conduct research and hold a series of meetings with historians, community leaders, and Geva audiences.

### Spring 2016

At Geva Theatre Center, two actors read excerpts from the speeches of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, entitled "Failure is Impossible." The theatre is packed for this event, and in a post-reading discussion with Jenni, the actors, Mat, and two local experts, the crowd marvels at the contemporary feeling of the issues. They discuss the movements following in the steps of Anthony and Douglass, such as the Disability Rights movement, Black Lives Matter, and the LGBT struggles for equality.

### Summer 2016

Mat spends several weeks in residence in Rochester. Following the "Failure is Impossible" event, he meets many local experts who help with research and providing insight into the lives of these beloved Rochestarians. Mat speaks with historians at the Mt. Hope Cemetery, the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, the Rochester Museum and Science Center, the University of Rochester's Rare Books Collection, and the City Historian at the Rochester Public Library – among many others who aid Mat in filling in the background of the play. Mat is in constant communication with Jenni, who serves as a sounding board for him to bounce ideas off of. They share insights and select Valerie Curtis-Newton, a Seattle-based director, to direct the first workshop of the play at Geva's Festival of New Theatre (FONT).

### Fall 2016

Mat has written the first draft of the play. Geva holds two workshops for *The Agitators* at the Festival of New Theatre. At the first workshop, Mat and the team share one day of rehearsal with the cast, followed by a reading the next night, a day for re-writes, two more days of rehearsal, and a second reading the following evening. At the talkback following the first reading, Mat receives a lot of feedback from the actors, the audience, and local historians, so the two readings – with the rewriting process in between – feature vastly different scripts. Specifically, the tone of Susan B. Anthony changes substantially between the first and second readings. And, although the first draft of the play gives the audience a good sense of Susan, Frederick – as a private person – isn't really represented beyond the movements for which he was an advocate. In the second draft, his character, family, and personal life come through with much more strength and detail.

### Winter 2016

Mat and Mark Cuddy (Geva's Artistic Director) hire Logan Vaughn to direct the production's October 2017 world premiere at Geva Theatre Center, and together they select a cast and design team. During this time between the first and second workshops of the play, Jenni gives Mat some additional notes and questions to consider – leading to another draft of the play. By analyzing the script, then reflecting back to the playwright, dramaturgs and Literary Directors like Jenni can help writers like Mat see if they're telling the story they want to tell. While the first draft of the play was concerned with the friendship of Anthony and Douglass, it was also very heavily steeped in the enormity of the movements they championed – and that was a lot to take in for one play. During this time, rewrites for the second draft of the play are becoming more focused on the friendship between Anthony and Douglass, and how it evolved, grew, and shifted as the country changed – and the impact that had on their relationship.

### May 2017

The second workshop of *The Agitators* takes place in New Harmony, Indiana. There are only four hours of rehearsal, followed by a reading that evening. The rehearsal is mostly comprised of conversations between Mat and the cast; Mat is curious about how the language will play if Susan and Frederick are portrayed by actors of the appropriate age, rather than two actors playing them for the entirety of the play. Therefore, in this workshop, there are three Fredericks and three Susans, all of different ages. From this workshop, Mat discovers that the integrity of the story will not be sacrificed if Susan and Frederick are played by the same two actors the entire show, and the creative team learns about the necessity of not shying away from their flaws as people. To tell this story today, it's crucial to explore the complexity and humanity of these extraordinary icons, so we can also relate to them as ordinary people.

### June 2017

The third workshop of *The Agitators* takes place in New York City. This workshop brings together the playwright, the dramaturg, the director, the cast, and the design team in the same room for the first time. They spend a week going through the play, in detail; there are many rewrites. The cast explores how and why to say the lines, and when something doesn't connect for them, Mat is there to provide an explanation of what he's going for, or to make adjustments. The designers are incredible dramaturgs themselves, and ask many insightful questions because they need to know how things work in order to bring the story to life onstage. In this workshop, Jenni serves as a resource to all the artists in the room by continuing to help clarify the story, providing historical context, asking questions, and helping others articulate what they are piecing together. With each draft, the play grows more complex and vital.

### Fall 2017

The cast of the world premiere production of *The Agitators* at Geva Theatre Center (Madeleine Lambert and Cedric Mays), along with Mat Smart, Logan Vaughn, Jenni Werner, and Stage Manager Frank Cavallo, have their first rehearsals together. They explore the script in a week of detailed table reads, then start to plan their staging. Design and production meetings occur regularly, and Mat continues to make important revisions, cuts, and additions to the script throughout the rehearsal process. ♦

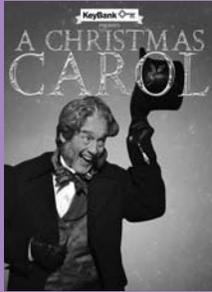
## About the Playwright: Mat Smart

Mat Smart writes plays about his hometown (Naperville, a suburb of Chicago), and his travels (he's been to all 50 states and all 7 continents). He received the 2015 Equity Jeff Award for Best New Work in Chicago for *The Royal Society of Antarctica* (Gift Theatre), which was developed at the Playwrights' Center in PlayLabs 2013 and inspired by his three-month stint working as a janitor at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. Mat's newest plays include *Kill Local* (La Jolla Playhouse), *Midwinter* (a commission from the Denver Center Theatre Company; workshop at the 2016 Colorado New Play Summit), and *Eden Prairie, 1971* – inspired by his three years living in Minneapolis from 2008 to 2011. He recently returned from South America where he spent time volunteering on an organic farm outside Mendoza, Argentina. Other plays include: *Naperville* (Slant Theatre Project, upcoming at Theatre Wit), *Tinker to Evers to Chance* (Geva Theatre Center, Merrimack Repertory Theatre), *Samuel J. and K.* (Williamstown Theatre Festival, Steppenwolf), *The Hopper Collection* (Magic Theatre, Huntington), *The 13th of Paris* (City Theatre, Seattle Public Theatre), and *The Debate over Courtney O'Connell of Columbus, Nebraska* (Slant, Chalk Repertory Theatre, Bryant Lake Bowl, and Theatre 502). Commissions: South Coast Repertory, Huntington, Denver Center, and Geva. He is a co-Artistic Director of NYC's Slant Theatre Project. Undergrad: University of Evansville. MFA: UCSD. ♦

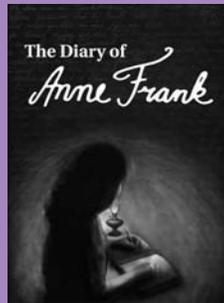
To learn more about this production, visit <https://www.GevaTheatre.org/engage-learn/programs-for-students/> for additional information including:

- \* The time periods and locations featured in the play
- \* Other characters' influence in *The Agitators*
- \* A timeline of historical events
- \* A compilation of resources used in this guide

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