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## 'Pope.L: The Escape' reworks a slavery play as performance art and dares you to wonder what to think about it



Adia Alli as Hannah in "Pope.L: The Escape" at Art Institute of Chicago. (Aidan Fitzpatrick photo)

BY Steve Johnson  
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The performance artist Pope.L is asking a lot of [Art Institute](#) audiences these days. His “experimental restaging” of a slavery narrative credited as the oldest surviving African-American play moves the few dozen attendees and performers from the bowels of the museum’s Rubloff Auditorium to its sound booth to, in one memorable, pungent moment, its women’s bathroom.

There, the play’s actors are in the stalls, performing a song as mournful as you might expect from a woman whose husband has been sold to

another farm. The audience knows to leave when Pope.L, a mostly silent ringmaster in the performance, opens the door and walks to the next unconventional location.

But more than the moderate physical demands of attending one of these eight, site-specific performances (continuing Nov. 29 to Dec. 2, and sold out), there are much more taxing psychological ones.

Is it OK to laugh when something is darkly funny — a doctor wishing for a yellow fever outbreak, to boost his practice, for instance — amid the talk of beatings and rape, of ownership and escape? Is Kanye West, as Pope.L's play-atop-a-play suggests, a loose contemporary analog to Cato, the play's self-interested slave character, or perhaps to the original playwright, messing with people's expectations that he adhere to orthodoxy?

The play in question is William Wells Brown's 1858 drama "The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom," based in part on his 1847 autobiography, a bestseller trailing only Frederick Douglass' among freed-slave memoirs.

And as presented in Chicago, "The Escape" is another thorn in society's paw from Pope.L, who also uses his first name, William, on his faculty web page at University of Chicago, where he teaches visual arts.

In the midst of winning a Guggenheim Fellowship and being selected for two Whitney Biennials, the multi-disciplinary conceptual artist, now in his early 60s, has staged crawls across Manhattan to, in part, dramatize homelessness; bottled tainted Flint, Mich., water for sale in a Detroit gallery; and mounted a massive, fraying American flag in a Los Angeles gallery in response to the manufactured controversy about Barack Obama not wearing a stars-and-stripes lapel pin.

He's also had more conventional exhibitions at spots including the Renaissance Society and the Art Institute. A New York Times profile earlier this year called him "inarguably the greatest performance artist of our time," and then suggested he would dispute that.

Pope.L, in an interview, said he taught "The Escape" for years at Bates College, in Maine, and in that time he developed the idea of a modern re-staging. He workshopped this new version at the Drawing Center in New York City in 2016 for planned performance there, but "the reactions were pretty tough," he said, and the Drawing Center "dropped" the project.

"People were upset about the humor that was used and whether I contextualized the material sufficiently so that people would understand where I was coming from," he said.

He revived the idea after the Art Institute asked if he had a project he wanted to do at the Chicago museum, he said. This time, the context is front and center. (And for further elucidation, some performances are being filmed for a presentation and discussion with the artist and performers Dec. 6 in the Rubloff; register for free tickets at [artic.edu](http://artic.edu).)

The first scene, in a basement corridor, has the lead actor explain that Brown was "born into slavery" — he repeats the phrase in thunderous tones, because it should never not be shocking — and that the author makes no great claims for his play because he "never aspired to be a dramatist."

But Pope.L sees the author as more than a mere dabbler. "Brown's acid sense of humor and his trickster attitude toward whiteness, American letters, and the idea of the literate black produced a text already experimental, already punk and radical," the artist explains in the playbill.

It is more radical now, as Pope.L conducts, in essence, an interrogation of the play, asking what meaning it might have today. “Pope.L: The Escape” melds some of the sear of “Twelve Years a Slave” with the jolt of fourth-wall removal and sprinkles of the Pythonesque.

“I hope they’re troubled, confused,” the author said of his intended audience, and said he hopes it messes with their minds. “I hope it does this thing to them that ends up being an action, you know, in the world.”

Small sections of dialogue and of Brown’s original story survive. Time slips between present and past, the setting between fact and fiction.

But the audience also hears original songs, including a toe-tapper about the sale of human flesh. It hears the names Kanye and Trump and, from the nearby galleries, the contemporary artist [Gerhard Richter](#).

Brown was concerned with questions of black solidarity; Pope.L updates that to reference not only Kanye’s recent comment about slavery being a choice but the modern “Black Lives Matter” movement.

While the actors are mostly in character, they perform, at times, as themselves, or at least as a person who shares their real-world name. The racial epithet used frequently in the original play is heard here, too, but amplified and chewed on by characters who then practically spit the word out.

Most of the time they are wearing green wigs and lab coats, presumably because this is experimental theater. But there’s a costuming surprise, too, that nudges the proceedings briefly into comic absurdity.

As the audience moves from setting to setting, there is also internal dislocation, a struggle to try to get a handle on this non-linear, impressionistic take on the nation’s original sin.

## MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

What do the characters themselves think? Pope.L has them wrestle with the question, and put as much of a bow on a things as he is willing to, in a raucous closing scene. His “The Escape” is a provocation on several levels and, always, a demonstration that our inhuman past bleeds into the present.