

## **THEATER REVIEW: BEHIND THE SHEET**

Charly Evon Simpson: *Behind the Sheet*. Ensemble Studio Theater, Manhattan, 2019

J. Marion Sims (1813-1883), the so-called “father of modern gynecology,” was arguably one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s most famous—if not one of the most controversial—American surgeons. He has been both praised and censured in the annals of medical history and in the public eye.

In a January 2019 production, staged by Manhattan’s off-Broadway Ensemble Studio Theater, the Sims saga is respectfully and artistically interpreted by a brilliant cast of skilled and expressive actors, who convey to the audience the sheer determination of a maverick surgeon and the heroic character of the slave women that he strove to rescue from the ravages of an overwhelmingly distressful physical and emotional hell.

The character of Sims is here portrayed by “George,” who has recently relocated from Philadelphia to a small town in Alabama, where he and his wife, “Josephine,” reside on a small plantation that employs a number of Negro slaves. It was not uncommon for young female slave workers to become pregnant—frequently, even by their owners—and, following a prolonged and traumatic labor, not infrequently to develop postpartum vesicovaginal and rectovaginal fistulas, resulting in a dreadful and heretofore miserable and incurable condition. The storyline traces George’s sincere efforts to address the possible repair of this perplexing complication and return its victims to improved health and productivity.

But the wider view examines and wrestles with social values of race, gender, and class, at that time not perceived as discriminatory, but subsequently—and even today—acknowledged to be among society’s most consternating moral issues.

The Ensemble Studio Theater, now in its 51<sup>st</sup> year, creates original and provocative new productions that challenge audiences to grapple with the interrelationship of gender, ethnicity, and class and the troubling social ills of racism and discrimination. In dealing with the timely and vexing topic of J. Marion Sims and his controversial approach to remediate an otherwise hopeless situation—perhaps by exploiting a particularly vulnerable population—the author, Charly Evon Simpson, and the Company have raised awareness of the complex ethical issues that not infrequently impinge on medical inquiry and progress.

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