

# The New York Times

N.Y. / REGION | THEATER REVIEW | NEW JERSEY

## *A Civil War Skirmish, Fought With Badinage*

A Review of ‘Butler,’ at the New Jersey Repertory Company

By KEN JAWOROWSKI     JUNE 20, 2014

Photo



David Sitler provides support in "Butler."

Credit

SuzAnne Barabas

**IT'S HARD TO CATEGORIZE** “Butler,” a new play being staged by the New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch. It’s part comedy, part historical drama and part biography, often all at once, and sometimes none of those. Yet the show is easy enough to review. Just call it splendid.

This exceedingly enjoyable production, set early in the Civil War, was inspired by real-life characters who were involved in a [critical event](#) in history. The story focuses on Major General Benjamin Butler of the Union Army. He has just arrived to take command of Fort Monroe, a Union outpost located in Virginia, a state that hours ago seceded. He soon has another problem besides the threat of attack: Three escaped slaves have appeared at the fort seeking sanctuary. Despite the conflict between the states, the general, who is a former lawyer, is required to return the slaves to their “rightful owner,” a colonel in the Confederate Army. “I’m sworn to uphold the law,” the general insists. “I cannot break the law, even if I disagree with the law.”

Before the colonel’s representative can arrive to take them away, one slave, Shepard Mallory, pleads his case. “We can stay here and help to kill Virginians, or you can send us back where we will help to kill you,” he says, setting in motion a debate over what is right versus what is legal, and raising questions of ethics and duty.

The beauty of the script, by **Richard Strand**, is how it approaches these thorny topics. In short, it’s a hoot. Rather than dry exposition or long-winded discussions, these men use wordplay that is by turns sarcastic, droll and witty. The

opening scene, in which the general reprimands his lieutenant, is uproarious. A back-and-forth between Butler and Mallory is both thoughtful and rollicking.

“So, I am not a slave and I’m not a free man,” Mallory says during an argument over his status, which has temporarily stumped both men. “What should I say I am?”

“Why do you have to say you are anything?” Butler roars back. “I don’t walk around telling people I’m a Presbyterian. Just keep your mouth shut.”

It’s tempting to compare **Mr. Strand’s** style to another writer’s — there is a touch of Tom Stoppard, perhaps, or a bit of Edward Albee. But ultimately his comic voice is his own: clever without being glib, meaningful without being pretentious. It’s a funny and impressive mixture.

[Ames Adamson](#) delivers a powerhouse performance as the title character, teasing out the blustery man’s complexities and contradictions. (This Union general, who a few weeks earlier was a civilian, had been an enthusiastic supporter of Jefferson Davis before the war.) In Mr. Adamson’s bold delivery, there is no doubt that a shrewd legal mind lies beneath a scalp that’s only half covered with hair.

John G. Williams is smooth as Mallory, particularly at the end of the first act,

when he goads Butler into taking a stand, either way, on whether to save his life or send him back to a likely death. Benjamin Sterling and David Sitler provide top-notch support in smaller roles. They are directed by Joseph Discher, who is skilled in moving his actors around a single, small set (neatly designed by [Jessica Parks](#), and lighted by Jill Nagle.)

To be sure, “Butler,” which is making its world premiere here, could use a tad more tightening in one or two sections. Yet that is a minor concern in a production in which most every quip hits the mark. (It’s also encouraging to see a new play that’s not another contemporary family drama or rehashed love story.)

At the end, it’s still not entirely clear how to classify this two-hour show. But such questions are beside the point. Only one category really matters to theatergoers — good play. Into that slot, “Butler” fits effortlessly.

# NEW JERSEY

by Bob Rendell

## ***Butler* Rousing New Civil War Comedy Premieres**

New Jersey Repertory Company



**Benjamin Sterling and Ames Adamson**

In two separate incidents prior to May 23, 1861, slaves who had sought sanctuary at Union military posts (Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens) had been returned to Confederate authorities under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act which held that slaves were property and had to be returned to their owners.

On May 23, newly commissioned and assigned Union Major-General Benjamin Butler was in command of Fort Monroe in Virginia when three runaway slaves sought sanctuary there. Butler was reluctant to return them to the Confederacy. The action which Butler took upon his own authority to resolve his moral dilemma is depicted in *Butler*, the new Civil War comedy by Richard Strand premiering at New Jersey

Repertory Company.

The details of the manner in which Butler undertook his significant historic action are lost to time. Thus, Strand has successfully undertaken the task of creating personalities and scenes which provide plausible motivations and situations.

However, the dialogue and interplay are *happily* not realistic. For, whether by intent or good fortune, Strand's clever, witty creation proves to be a rousing, witty, and quite pointed comedy. The interplay and repartee involving the four male protagonists is theatrical and intellectually refreshing. Very importantly, it illuminates the historical moment that it depicts, and renders the idea of treating a human being as property as an absurdity.

Ames Adamson's Butler is a cantankerous, overbearing individual with a clever mind, moral code, and a great deal of self assurance. His over intensity as performed by Adamson enhances the comedy. John G. Williams is superb as runaway slave Shepard Mallory. Mallory, despite his own cantankerousness, is so perfectly brilliant, funny, reasonable, articulate and likeable that he could only exist in literature. And this is all to the good in the context of the artifice of *Butler*.

Solid support comes from Benjamin Sterling as Butler's aide, Lt. Kelly, and David Sitler as confederate Major Cary. Sterling conveys maturation in Kelly as a result of his observation and participation in the events portrayed. Sitler is on target as the foil for Butler and the others.

Director Joseph Discher has elicited lively, excellent performances which bring out all the wit and passion of the text. Jessica Parks has designed a detailed fortress of a commander's office.

Although it always holds our interest, *Butler* initially plays like a light history lesson for families. However, once it gets rolling, it becomes a clever, full-blown comedy which could become widely popular.

*Butler* continues performances (Evenings: Thursday, Friday and Saturday 8 pm/ Matinees: Saturday 3 pm; Sunday 2 pm) through July 13, 2014, at the New Jersey Repertory Company, 179 Broadway, Long Branch, New Jersey 07740; box office: 732-229-3166; online: [www.njrep.org](http://www.njrep.org).

**BWW Reviews: BUTLER at NJ Rep - A Fascinating and Entertaining Historical Play**

June 17, 2014

"Lawyers manipulate language to make the laws what they want them to be."

From *Butler* by Richard Strand

The World Premiere of *Butler* is now being performed at New Jersey Repertory Company (NJ Rep) in Long Branch through July 13th. It is a completely entertaining play, artfully written by Richard Strand. *Butler* has received the prestigious Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award. It is based on real life events that changed the lives of more than 10,000 slaves. Director, Joseph Discher, has done a superb job of bringing this story to the NJ Rep stage with flawless staging and creative touches.

The play is set at the start of the Civil War. Benjamin Butler ([Ames Adamson](#)), a Massachusetts lawyer, is promoted to Major General and given command of Fort Monroe, a Union hold-out in the state of Virginia. Butler is a spirited and independent individual who finds himself in an explosive situation when Shepard Mallory (John G. Williams), a runaway slave, requests sanctuary at the fort along with two other slaves. Assisting Butler in his official duties at the fort is the diligent and serious West-Point graduate, Lieutenant Kelly ([Benjamin Stirling](#)).

According to the law of the land, Shepard Mallory is considered property and must be turned over to his owners in the South, a situation that would surely result in the man's death. Benjamin Butler is confronted with a moral dilemma, one which is compounded when the fort is visited by Confederate officer, Major Cary ([David Sitler](#)), who intends to take back Mallory.

The play takes place in Major General Butler's office and the dialogue between the men is very lively. Butler is a cantankerous sort, yet thoughtful and intelligent. Mallory is a defiant young man, relentless in his desire to stay at the fort. And, it is Kelly who attempts to maintain order in the face of difficult circumstances.

The four man cast is outstanding in their roles. [Ames Adamson](#) as Butler brings just the right touch of humanity to his very demanding role. John G. Williams as Mallory has his part just right. He is at first presented as a "dislikable" character. Yet, as the play unfolds and more is revealed, Mallory's personality is well understood. [Benjamin Stirling](#) maintains the right tenor as the lieutenant who strives to maintain his professionalism. And [David Sitler](#)'s portrayal of Major Carey brings the Old South alive

when he visits Butler's office.

There is just the right amount of humor in *Butler*, moments in the play that keep it moving and offset the serious nature of the subject. It is a very significant piece of theater, a timeless exploration of social conscience and individual responsibility.

You don't have to be a history buff to enjoy *Butler*, now at New Jersey Repertory through July 13th. For tickets call 732-229-3166 or visit [www.njrep.org](http://www.njrep.org).

Photo Credit: SuzAnne Barabas .



# *A CurtainUp* New Jersey Review

By [Simon Saltzman](#)

*We are fighting to uphold the law. We can't suddenly decide to break the law in order to uphold it. — Butler*

*Sure you can. You're a lawyer. You can twist the law. You can make the law be anything you want it to be. You can make a law mean the opposite of what it's supposed to mean. That's what lawyers do, isn't it? — Mallory*



Left to Right: John G. Williams & Ames Adamson (Photo Credit: SuzAnne Barabas).

Former Massachusetts attorney Benjamin Butler (Ames Adamson) may be insecure and ill-prepared to assume his role of Major General in 1861 at the start of the Civil War. And he also doubts if he is up to meeting the unexpected challenge he is faced with at Fort Monroe in Virginia where he is newly in command. The war has barely begun and Butler must decide if he is obliged to disobey the law of the land wherein a slave must be returned to their owner. He ponders this with resolve when confronted by Shepard Mallory (John G. Williams) a runaway slave who has asked for sanctuary at this strategic post.

*Butler* is an excellent and engrossing play laced with humor by playwright Richard Strand. It is comprised of a series of blistering confrontations primarily between Butler and the unexpectedly literate and erudite Mallory. Although it is charged with socio-political inquiry, it is also fueled by its amusingly discharged discourse between the authoritarian general and the

fervently argumentative slave who is making his plea to be conscripted into the Union Army. It becomes more of a major issue when Butler's refusal to return the slave could mean his court-martial and a certain death sentence for the slave.

The dilemma reaches a peak when Butler is visited by an arrogant Confederate Major Cary (David Stiller) who, acting under authority of the slave's owner, demands his return. Under Butler's command is Lt. Kelly (Benjamin Sterling), who generally confounded by his superior's decisions.

Strand, who says that he was made aware of the real incident by way of a footnote in a Lincoln biography, is chairman of the theater department at Mt. San Antonio College where he teaches "History of Theater and Playwriting." He is to be commended for making his play a thoroughly entertaining and dramatically informed return to an historical incident. The director Joseph Discher, noted for his laudable 2002 to 2010 tenure as Associate Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, has encouraged splendid performances from the four actors, each giving vivid portrayals of the play's well-defined characters.

The play is set within Butler's office, as effectively designed by Jessica Parks. It has the modest decor of a masculine study with an easy chair, book shelves, a throw rug, a Lincoln portrait, wall map and a flag. In it, Butler presides deploying all the techniques and tactics of a skilled lawyer. Adamson takes the disagreeable personality of his character quite seriously even as he toys with and tests the patience of those in his presence. Mostly bald except for the long black hair that fills up the back of his head and a formidable mustache, Adamson is at his best bellowing, the better to keep his adversaries on guard. "If I heard myself talking, I would consider better what I was saying."

Williams is impressive as the formidably assertive Mallory who has led a small group of slaves (unseen) of slaves to the fort. Tough, insolent, and as argumentative as is Butler, Mallory is willing to risk everything for freedom and a chance to join the Union Army. The tide begins to turn when Butler realizes that the slaves who are being used to build bridges for the Confederacy and may be held and considered as contraband.

Condescension marks Stiller fine performance as Major Cary just as nonplussed compliance defines Sterling as Lt. Kelly. The play moves along as swiftly as the twisting and turning of the decisions being made will undoubtedly help in turning the tide of the war with Lincoln's unveiling of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. There is likely more to be heard about *Butler* following this world premiere.



## Review: World premiere of 'Butler' at NJ Rep in Long Branch

First, banish any preconceived notions that [BUTLER](#), Richard Strand's new play currently at [NJ Rep](#), is about the life of a domestic servant – the sort with Oprah Winfrey in the background to provide moral support. The title actually refers to real-life Civil War Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, who served the Union as commander of Fort Monroe, Virginia, where the play is set.

The events of May 1861 are matters of historical record: three runaway slaves arrived at the Fort seeking sanctuary. Butler's predicament is whether to return them to their rightful owners (as per the laws of the time) where they will most certainly face torture or death, or to somehow allow them to escape North to freedom. Both options seem equally unacceptable to the slaves, who insist on sanctuary – also a matter of historical fact. What is not fact, of course, are the imagined conversations between Butler and the slaves (here embodied by Strand-appointed spokesman, Shepard Mallory); those are strictly the manufacture of the playwright. And riveting stuff, they are indeed.

Strand opens his play with an extended verbal exchange between Butler (a commanding Ames Adamson) and his Lieutenant (an appropriately obsequious Benjamin Sterling), who has the unfortunate duty to convey the slaves' demands to the astonished Butler. The Major General's pre-War profession becomes increasingly apparent as he engages in a lengthy linguistic diatribe over the Lieutenant's unfortunate use of the word 'demands'. Only a lawyer could so vigorously battle over the verbiage used by a duty-torn soldier. The sequence brilliantly sets up what is to come – a war of wits and witticisms. Mallory (a wonderful John G. Williams) is a well educated slave – one who may or may not be able to read but who has a vocabulary that surely comes from something other than building Southern garrets, which has been his main pastime of late. Whatever its source, this educational edge allows him to go toe to toe with the Major General – taking the blustery Butler somewhat aback.

In the play's second act, the Confederacy sends munitions expert Major Cary (a dignified David Sitler) to retrieve their 'property.' Once again, wily wordsmith Butler engages mightily with Cary, whom he rightly assumes is more Southern spy than official emissary. How the issue is eventually resolved is on a par with the most brilliant courtroom drama – showing that Butler's brain is certainly mightier than his bravery or brawn. Without resorting to history book spoilers, Act Two finds Butler taking issue with another choice word – 'contraband' – and manipulating a recent declaration from the Commonwealth to his own ends.

Strand's play is pitch perfect in both structure and dialogue – a rarity for a world premiere. He paints a textual picture of a man who is more at home on the bench than the battlefield. Strand's Butler is a complex character, one with moral ambiguities – a beast with a brain. In his NJ Rep debut, director Joseph Discher stages the play with a no-nonsense briskness that always values words over movement, something that would please the Major General, no doubt.

With a rock-solid script and assured direction, the success of the play falls to the actor cast as Butler. NJ Rep regular Ames Adamson is nothing short of magnificent in the title role. His is a considered, exacting performance that keeps us riveted throughout. Thanks to his odd period hairstyle and desk-jockey paunch, Adamson also looks alarmingly like photographs of the real-life Butler. The actor inhabits the character inside and out.

George S. Kaufman once quipped that “God writes lousy theatre” - meaning that the events of history are rarely interesting enough on their own without a dramatist's intervention. In BUTLER, the Deity comes as close as can be imagined, and Strand and company more than capably provide the rest.

BUTLER continues at New Jersey Repertory Company, 179 Broadway, Long Branch, NJ, through July 13th. For tickets and information contact [www.njrep.com](http://www.njrep.com) or call 732-229-3166

Review by Michael T. Mooney

# NJ Rep's 'Butler' serves up ripping historical drama

**Tom Cheseck, Correspondent** 1:02 p.m. EDT July 2, 2014

To most Americans, he's hardly a household name — not even a schoolhouse name — although there are places in this land where a souvenir shopper can purchase a chamber pot with his picture at the bottom. With the opening of the play "Butler," however, the real-life Civil War general Benjamin Butler gets to state his case in a way that, while it probably won't make him any more likeable, at least allows us to "just see things differently."

Indeed, the Union officer who would come to be known as "Beast Butler" is pretty hard to like at the outset of Richard Strand's surprisingly good-humored historical drama, now in its world premiere engagement at New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch. When we meet Butler (Ames Adamson), he's a politically connected Yankee attorney, fast-tracked into a commission as a major general; a man with a fondness for fine sherry, and an apparent disdain for his new command — Fort Monroe, a moated medieval castle of a Union stronghold that sits squarely inside Confederate territory.

Set entirely inside the general's office at the fort (a scrupulously researched and detailed design by Jessica Parks), "Butler" wastes no time getting to the heart of the matter — or would, if Butler didn't greet the news that three escaped slaves have shown up seeking sanctuary, by haranguing his loyal and efficient lieutenant (Benjamin Sterling) over his choice of words, nit-picking protocols and conducting his vaguely sadistic head games in the petty and condescending manner of the classic Bad Boss.

The dynamic changes dramatically when Lt. Kelly ushers in the runaway slave Shepard Mallory (John G. Williams) — an educated, literate escapee with a confrontational way,

and some potentially valuable intelligence on the nearby Rebel positions. Alternately "humble and arrogant, scared and obnoxious," the strange young man — one who declares, "there's not another person reminds me of me" — would appear to have flummoxed and perhaps even fascinated the potbellied lawyer.

Of course, Butler has an even thornier matter on his hands, in that the law of the land states unequivocally that a straying slave be returned to his owner. When it's learned that the fort is to receive a visit from Confederate Major Cary (David Sitler) — and that Mallory will almost certainly be consigned to a death sentence — the legal eagle from Massachusetts concocts a solution that has the potential to either ruin his career, or perhaps turn the tide of the slavery issue in a way that the most decisive battlefield victory could never manage.

### **Word-warrior**

While real-world General Butler had his (rather unsuccessful) turn in the saddle as a field commander, Strand wisely chooses to present the man as a word-warrior who jockeys a desk instead of a steed — and who brandishes a toasting goblet with the assurance of a leader's sword. It's there in the claustrophobic confines of the commander's quarters that some significant history is made (some outdoor events have even been relocated to the great indoors), and the playwright provides a compelling history lesson that's laced with a surprising amount of humor.

Adamson, a versatile character player with a genuine flair for comedy (and a man-out-of-time affinity for nineteenth-century figures) has worked with director Joseph Discher to frame a bureaucrat whose arrogance is tempered by an underlying sense of his own ridiculousness. It's a quality most evident in Butler's second-act scene with the "hornswoggling jackanape" Cary; a couple of comfortable civilians with a past history, a mutual acquaintance, and a military career measured in mere weeks.

Onstage for the entirety of the play's action, Adamson finds a good working rhythm with all three of his fellow cast members — particularly in an "edutaining" sequence wherein Butler attempts to explain his quickly concocted strategy to Mallory and Kelly. It's Williams as Mallory who plays the pivotal part here; a catalyzing presence with a coolly contemporary edge — and it's Sterling's Kelly who undergoes the greatest journey, from a steadfast West Pointer who doesn't much care for Negroes, to an ally at the frontlines of some decidedly uncharted territory.

Well crafted and dotted with little surprises, "Butler" functions like the best historical plays — the kind that give the actors something to sink their teeth into, and that give the audience a chance to, as they say, see things different. The play continues with performances Thursdays through Sundays until July 13. Ticket reservations (\$40), showtimes and additional information can be obtained by calling 732-229-3166 or visiting [www.njrep.org](http://www.njrep.org).



## ***NEW JERSEY STAGE***

***"Butler" is Brilliant!***

***By Gary Wien***

***"Running away is easy... the only thing is we didn't have any place to run to."***

(LONG BRANCH, NJ) - New Jersey Repertory Company has world premiered many plays during its 17-year existence in Long Branch, but "Butler" - the company's latest production - just might be my favorite to date. Based on real life events that changed the lives of more than 10,000 slaves, the play is expertly constructed by playwright Richard Strand, superbly acted, and uplifting as it shows how simple decisions can truly change the course of history. It's an often hilarious look at a particularly important part of the Civil War that history books often ignore.

The play is set inside the command post of Fort Monroe in Virginia during the beginning of the Civil War. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln is the giveaway that this is a Union hold out. Major General Butler, a lawyer from Massachusetts who worked his way up quickly to his current rank despite never receiving any military training, is in charge. Butler (played by NJ Rep regular Ames Adamson) is interrupted by Lieutenant Kelly (Benjamin Sterling) with news that a runaway slave is at the fort demanding to see him. The Major General is astonished by the news, and is determined to clarify what exactly leads him to astonishment over merely being surprised. In an opening scene that plays out like an extended Monty Python skit, Butler introduces the concept of how and why words matter. And words like "astonishment" and "demands" are two which are featured prominently throughout the play.

Butler doesn't like people making demands of him. In fact, he points out to the Lieutenant that the only people who have the right to demand things from him include the President, the President's cabinet, all those who outrank him, and his wife. The scene truly establishes Butler as a man of the law. He may no longer be a civilian, but his actions are still determined by legal concepts. While building his case that words matter, Butler also begins setting up the framework for a second case. Butler asks the Lieutenant for the name of the runaway slave, but it never occurred to the Lieutenant to ask. Even though he's fighting for the North, the Lieutenant is guilty of treating the man as property himself - something pointed out by the Major General.

"Lieutenant, do you dislike all negroes?" asks Butler.

"If all negroes are like this negro... then yes," he replies.

Butler is warned by the Lieutenant that the runaway slave is dangerous and he should be armed when meeting him. It's advice that Butler wrestles with, but ultimately decides to ignore. While the scene may seem a bit long, it contains many clever and humorous lines, and everything said during this point is important in the play's construction.

The play really takes off when the runaway slave enters the picture. John G. Williams gives a remarkable performance as Shepard Mallory, an educated black man seeking refuge at the fort. During the first act, Williams provides one of the best acting

performances I've ever seen on the NJ Rep stage, or anywhere else for that matter. He shows anger and pain, but restraint as well. It's his mastery of restraint that is remarkable. Mallory has such an amazing backstory and Williams lets us see the man's history through his eyes and clenched fists. Instead of acting mean or crazy, his character simply is mean and crazy. It's an acting performance that seems effortless... It's perfect!

Mallory's anger stems largely from being a man out of time; a hundred years from his era and he might have become a political leader. Yet, during his time, he is a piece of property carrying a series of scars on his back from disagreements with people. Mallory came to the fort with the hope that Butler's legal background could help him, as he's been told lawyers can twist the law as they wish.

Butler is amazed at the way Mallory talks - refined, sometimes using very large words — and filled with sophisticated concepts of thought. Butler also picks up on the fact that the slave knows how to read. Confused about what he's seeing, he asks, "Are all negroes like you?"

"Yes suh, once you meet one, there's pretty much no need to meet another," wisecracks Mallory.

The Major General is fascinated by the contradictions posed by Mallory. He describes the slave as being scared and obnoxious, humble yet arrogant. Butler says, "I'm trying to understand you, I want to understand you."

"The way I am... gets me in a world of trouble," admitted Mallory. "There is no person in this world, white or black, that reminds me of me."

Recognizing that his initial request to seek asylum in the fort is not going well, Mallory goes a different route, offering his services as a spy and to help build military fortifications as he's done for the Confederacy. Butler is shocked to learn that the Confederates were using slaves for such purposes.

"It didn't occur to you that the Confederate Army was using slaves to build fortifications? How can the Union Army win the war if the generals are as dumb as you?" Mallory blurts out. An admission, he instantly wishes he could take back. As he's leaving the office, Mallory says, "General Butler, that's the sort of thing that got me whipped."

Mallory begs Butler to come up with a loophole in the law, something the Major General denies that lawyers do, but it's the only hope the slave has. After some time thinking over the situation, Butler has another meeting with Mallory. Butler informs him that his owner is sending someone over to pick him and the other two runaway slaves that came to the fort with Mallory back to their owners. He offers Mallory a choice: go back to his owner or escape the fort and start heading north immediately.

"Where do you expect me to go?" asks Mallory. "To Maryland? I don't believe I'd be very popular there either."

The longer the two are in the same room together, the more they see how much they are alike. Mallory and the other slaves came to the fort with the hope of joining the Union Army, a fantasy for the era; however, his knowledge of confederate troops and military installations impresses Butler and the Lieutenant. The most impressive note was his detailed information about Major Cary, the man coming to pick up the slaves. Mallory instructs them to blindfold the man, as he's not an ordinary soldier and was chosen for this assignment on purpose.

The Lieutenant originally hated Mallory, as most people do, but his views appear to change as he spends more time with him. It's a fascinating look at racism and how prejudices can change once you're able to put a name to the face.

Mallory's goal all along was for the Major General to use his expertise of the law to find some sort of loophole to ensure his survival and, in the second act, he finds one... and it's a doozy!

If you think social media spreads news around the globe fast today, you'll be amazed to see how fast Butler's final decision changes things within Virginia.

Ames Adamson is excellent as Butler. A veteran of many plays at NJ Rep, this role just might be his best to date. He offers a truly realistic portrayal of a lawyer thrust into a wartime role, trying to hold on to his humanity, and his comic timing is perfect.

Benjamin Sterling as Lieutenant Kelly is a great side-man whose constant interruptions of Butler are humorous throughout. He does a nice job of showing growth as a character from initial hatred of Mallory to suspicion to champion of his cause.

David Sitler as Major Cary isn't on stage very much, but does a wonderful job in a limited role. He portrays the Southern soldier as someone trying very much to remain dignified in a situation that's anything but dignified.

But John G. Williams steals the show; simply a tremendous performance as Shepard Mallory. Powerful, intense, hilarious, and thought-provoking... it has to be seen.

Credit should also go to Joseph Discher, whose direction lets us believe in these characters and in the wonderful dialogue written by Richard Strand. The play's pace is good and comic timing is excellent.

This play was a welcome surprise for me. New Jersey Repertory Company is known as an incubator of new works. Theatre absolutely needs companies like NJ Rep, but presenting new works offers many challenges. Some productions are very good, some are a bit ambitious, and some need a little fine-tuning. Many go on to have lives of their own on stages throughout the world; yet, few arrive in Long Branch as complete in design as this one. The dialogue is fantastic, the characters are well defined, and the story moves along crisply. It's so well constructed that it's hard to believe it hasn't gone through a series of productions and workshops and fine-tuning already. It's complete. And it's very,

very good.

It's got great acting, great comedy, and tells a great story... "Butler" is recommended immensely!

# SCENE ON STAGE

## The “Butler” Did It!

*Posted on June 30, 2014 by [Philip Dorian](#)*

2 COMMENTS

Rarely has a slice of history been as entertainingly – and accurately – portrayed as in “Butler,” Richard Strand’s world-premiere play at New Jersey Repertory Company. The characters in “Butler” really existed and the circumstances really occurred. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that the dialogue was lifted from an actual recording.

There was, of course, no recording device in the office of the Commander of Fort Monroe, Virginia on May 23, 1861, six weeks after the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter precipitated the Civil War. No, the dialogue between General Benjamin F. Butler and an escaped Negro slave, as he’s labeled, is fabricated by Strand, who scripted it into “Butler.” Lucky us.



John G. Williams, left, and Ames Adamson (Photos: SuzAnne Barabas)

General Butler (Ames Adamson) and his adjutant, Lt. Kelly (Benjamin Sterling), are astonished by the audacity of Shepard Mallory (John G. Williams), who, seeking sanctuary, “demands” to speak with the General.

Fort Monroe, a Union facility, is in Virginia, which had declared itself a Confederate state. The Articles of War mandated that fugitive slaves, deemed “property,” be returned to their owners.

The onerous Article was thwarted through an intricate legal maneuver that revolutionized the disposition of slaves and which forms the basis of the play. (When President Lincoln was informed, he directed other Union generals to do the same.)

Strand’s characters evolve from mutual hatred to grudging respect and even hints of friendship. (General Butler letting the slave call him “Ben” seems a stretch, but who knows? Maybe he did.) The attitude adjustment occurs naturally over the deftly directed (Joseph Discher) two hours.

Affecting the real Butler’s half billiard ball, half bushy hair style, Adamson creates a martinet with heart. The portly General is firmly in command, but he’s also a good listener, not above accepting an escaped slave’s guidance. Adamson, a highly skilled character actor, huffs and puffs when appropriate, but his General knows that a calming glass of sherry can relieve tension. Or create it.



From left: David Sitler, Benjamin Sterling, Ames Adamson  
Sterling is indeed sterling as Lt. Kelly, whose rigid manner thaws into

comradeship, and David Sitler plays a Confederate Major who arrives to take the slave back to his owner. The Major could have been a caricatured buffoon, but Sitler, whose mutton-chop whiskers are perfection, does not over-act the pompous Major.

The revelation in “Butler” is John G. Williams, who enacts Shepard Mallory’s combination of arrogance and desperation to a tee. Fearing for his life, dressed in rags and manacled, the slave maintains his dignity. It’s a fine performance.

The wickedness of slavery is communicated without any lurid descriptions or use of language that must have been common in 1861. Who would imagine that a slave’s fear that his ability to read might be discovered could induce shudders on his behalf?

At the end of “Butler,” something mysterious occurs that couldn’t have happened in the time frame presented. Well guess what: that’s what did happen and when. Richard Strand didn’t invent his plot, but there aren’t any new ones anyway. Like most new plays, “Butler” would benefit from some trimming, especially in the early scenes, but making imaginary *or* real characters so sympathetic, so funny and so relevant, is damn good playwriting no matter the source.

*Through July 13 at New Jersey Rep, 179 Broadway, Long Branch. Performances Thurs & Fri at 8pm; Sat at 3 & 8; Sun at 2pm. Tickets (\$42): 732-229-3166 or at [www.njrep.org](http://www.njrep.org)*

[Postscript: Later, less-admirable activities earned General Benjamin F. Butler the nickname “Beast Butler.” I can’t wait for Strand’s sequel!)