

# **THE *AMISTAD* CASE**

**By William Baer**

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**“It moved me, and I admire it a great deal.” The story is well-balanced “between seeing and feeling,” and that the “language is apt and telling.”**

**— Arthur Miller, playwright, about *The Amistad Case*.**

#### **STORY OF THE PLAY**

In 1839, African slaves being transported by the Cuban schooner, *Amistad*, were inspired by their leader, Cinqué, to rise up and seize the ship. In the aftermath, they were unable to steer a proper course for Africa and the ship headed north, ending up off the coast of Long Island, New York, where the *Amistad* was seized and the slaves were claimed as property by the Spanish government. *The Amistad Case* chronicles these extraordinary historical incidents as well as the subsequent cause-célèbre trials which took place in New Haven, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. The play focuses on Cinqué, the enigmatic leader of the slaves; the world-renowned abolitionist, Lewis Tappan; and the elderly ex-president, John Quincy Adams, who eloquently defended the slaves in the landmark Supreme Court case.

#### **HISTORICAL NOTE**

This play is based on the actual records of the *Amistad* case which reached its legal climax before the U.S. Supreme Court in March, 1841. No theatrical representation can presume absolute historical documentary, and there have been compressions of time and place and incident in the drama to facilitate the narrative action. Nevertheless, the facts and the individuals portrayed in the play are true to the historical events, and every effort has been made to accurately depict the personalities and characters of the principal figures as revealed in the historical records.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**  
(21 m, 2 w, 1 g, 1 b, extras)

**THE PRINCIPALS:**

**CINQUÉ:** The leader of the *Amistad* Africans. A lean, powerful, middle-sized man in his late 20s.

**LEWIS TAPPAN:** Abolitionist supporter of the *Amistad* Africans. A determined, blunt, highly-religious man in his late 60s.

**JOHN QUINCY ADAMS:** Former President of the United States and currently the senior Congressman from Massachusetts. Despite his 73 years, he remains both the combative statesman and the refined gentleman.

**SUPPORTING ROLES:**

**RAMÓN FERRER:** Captain of the *Amistad* schooner. A competent man in his mid-50s.

**CELESTINE:** Captain Ferrer's son and mate on the *Amistad*, age 20.

**JOSÉ RUIZ:** Cuban purchaser of the *Amistad* males. A glib and sophisticated man in his mid-30s.

**PEDRO MONTES:** Cuban purchaser of the four *Amistad* children, in his late 50s.

**MARGRU:** The oldest girl of the four *Amistad* children, six years old, shy and charming.

**ALAN REYNOLDS:** Arrogant aide to President Van Buren, in his early 40s.

**JOHN FORSYTH:** U.S. Secretary of State from Georgia, age 62.

**MARTIN VAN BUREN:** President of the United States, age 60. An extremely adept political operative up for re-election.

**COLONEL PENDLETON:** The New Haven jailer of the *Amistad* Africans, in his mid-50s.

**ROGER SHERMAN BALDWIN:** Famous defense attorney for the *Amistad* Africans, in his late 50s.

**KALE:** The only boy of the *Amistad* Africans, age 10.

**MRS. PENDLETON:** Like her husband, a legal caretaker of the *Amistad* Africans, in her early 50s.

**JAMES COVEY:** Free African seaman who becomes the primary translator for the *Amistad* Africans, in his early 20s.

**AMOS TOWNSEND:** Young, determined abolitionist, age 21.

**ANDREW T. JUDSON:** Connecticut District Court judge, a Van Buren appointee in his 60s.

**WILLIAM S. HOLABIRD:** U.S. District Attorney, a political hack in his late 60s.

**JEREMY LEARY:** Irish-immigrant coachman for John Quincy Adams, in his late 30s.

**LOUISA ADAMS:** Wife of John Quincy Adams, age 67.

**DR. ELLIS LAWRENCE:** Personal physician and close friend of John Quincy Adams, age 65.

**CHARLES ADAMS:** Handsome, 35-year-old son of the ex-President, now running for Congress.

**CHIEF JUSTICE ROGER TANEY:** A competent judge and a slave-owner from Maryland, age 65.

**JUSTICE JOSEPH STORY:** Brilliant jurist of the Supreme Court, age 63.

**OTHER CAST ROLES:**

*The Amistad Case*

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AMISTAD AFRICANS  
FERNANDO  
PRISON SPECTATORS  
PHRENOLOGIST  
YOUNG JAILER  
TRIAL SPECTATORS

HOLABIRD'S ASSISTANT  
THE ADAMS' HOUSEMAID  
THREE MEN WHO CARRY JEREMY LEARY  
SUPREME COURT JUSTICES  
TWO U.S. ATTORNEYS  
TWO SUPREME COURT BAILIFFS

**SYNOPSIS OF SCENES**

Prologue: Schooner *Amistad*, off the coast of Cuba, 1839.

Scene 1: New Haven Jail, Connecticut, 1839.

Scene 2: President's chamber, Washington, DC.

Scene 3: U.S. House of Representatives.

Scene 4: New Haven Jail, Connecticut.

Scene 5: President's Chamber, Washington, DC.

Scene 6: New Haven Jail, Connecticut, 1840.

Scene 7: New Haven Courtroom, Connecticut.

Scene 8: Adams' Study, Washington, DC.

Scene 9: New Haven Courtroom, Connecticut.

Act II:

Scene 1 : Adams' study, Washington D.C.

Scene 2: New Haven jail, Connecticut.

Scene 3: The Washington Mall, 1841.

Scene 4: Adams' study, Washington, D.C.

Scene 5: The U.S. Supreme Court.

Scene 6: New Haven Jail, Connecticut.

Scene 7: The U.S. Supreme Court.

Scene 8: New Haven Jail, Connecticut.

Epilogue: Adams Study, Washington, DC, 1847.

## PROLOGUE

*(AT RISE: The schooner Amistad, off the coast of Cuba, 1839. A male voice is heard singing a soft, romantic, Spanish ballad. As the LIGHTS come up near the foremast, the sounds of the OCEAN WAVES can also be heard. It's late at night, and the captain of the schooner, RAMÓN FERRER, stands alert at the wheel. Ferrer looks both weary and relieved as he guides the ship through the moonlight. Nearby, CELESTINE FERRER, sitting near the mast on a barrel, stares out into the dark ocean like his father, and finishes his song. In the shadows on the aft side of the deck, apparently out of earshot, another sailor, FERNANDO, lounges on the deck. He's sitting on a large crate and carving something in the faint moonlight.)*

CELESTINE: La borrasca ha cesado al fin.

FERRER: Sí, gracias a Dios. En dos días llegamos a Puerto Príncipe.

CELESTINE: ¡Qué bueno será llegar a casa!

FERRER: *(Nods wistfully.)* Sí, a casa.

*(Then FERRER hears something, and he stops to listen. Softly, a weary chanting-song is heard rising from beneath the deck. As the scene progresses, it gradually increases in volume and intensity. CELESTINE stands up; he's wearing a whip attached to his belt.)*

CELESTINE: Los negros.

*(CELESTINE speaks with contempt and derision, and the CAPTAIN nods. Then the sharp sound of CHAINS is heard from below the deck, and both men look at the door to the hold in the middle of the deck. The sailor FERNANDO also looks up from his carving.)*

FERRER: ¿Qué les pasa esta noche?

CELESTINE: ¡Malditos negros! Les voy a dar de latigazos. *(As HE holds up his whip, there's another LOUD METALLIC SOUND right below the door to the deck.)*

FERRER: *(Concerned.)* ¿Qué pasa? *(ALL three men stare at the door to the hold, then FERRER yells to FERNANDO.)* ¡Baja a ver a los negros! *(FERNANDO rises up, grabs a hard wooden beating-cane from where it's leaning on the crate, and approaches the hold. But when there's another loud SOUND, he steps back.)* ¡Baja inmediatamente!

*(But FERNANDO hesitates again, and the enraged CELESTINE boldly walks across the deck toward the hold with his whip. Suddenly, the hold door springs open and CINQUÉ appears on the deck. Although somewhat small in stature, Cinqué has a commanding presence. He wears only a white cloth wrapped around his waist, but he brandishes a sugar cane machete. With intense determination, he coldly stares at the CAPTAIN.)*

*Almost immediately, Cinqué is followed on deck by OTHER BLACK MALES, some with*

shackles or manacles still attached to their feet and hands. They also carry long sugar cane knives. As the scene progresses, more and more manacled black males rise up through the hold, some still chanting.

Infuriated at the Africans' mutiny, Celestine throws down his whip, pulls out his sailor's knife, and rushes toward Cinqué. But Cinqué is not intimidated. He calmly steps forward and violently slashes his machete into the young man's neck, killing him instantly. As Celestine crashes to the deck, Fernando slips away to the aft end of the ship and exits. Enflamed by Cinqué's stunning triumph, the other Blacks cry out wild phrases in their own Mendi language, or cry "¡Muerto el Capitán!" or sometimes even "Kill! Kill!" in English. Seeing what he's up against, Ferrer abandons the wheel, pulls his rapier, and turns to face Cinqué.)

FERRER: (Desperately, to CINQUÉ.) No seas tonto. ¡Suelta el machete!

(But CINQUÉ remains impassive, completely unmoved. Suddenly, TWO OTHER EMBOLDENED BLACKS rush past their leader, and FERRER expertly stabs them both, mortally, in the abdomen. But Cinqué still remains calm. Then, as the others watch, he approaches the Captain, slashes the man's leg, and crashes a powerful machete blow down on Ferrer's shoulder. As the captain sinks to the deck, still fighting futilely, SEVERAL OTHER BLACKS rush forward and drive him down with incessant wild blows.

While Ferrer struggles in vain, there's another disturbance from the aft of the deck as a SMALL GROUP OF AFRICAN MEN lead two Cuban men, both manacled, to the foremast and force them to kneel down before Cinqué. The younger man, SEÑOR RUIZ, is a sophisticated, well-dressed man; the other, SEÑOR MONTES, is more visibly terrified. Also seen nearby is a confused and horrified young African girl, MARGRU, who has unobtrusively appeared on the deck. In shock, Margru stares at everything around her in silent disbelief.

When Captain Ferrer is finally dead, a triumphant Cinqué looks down coldly at the kneeling Cubans. Now in complete command of the ship, he raises his machete over his head and cries out to his followers.)

CINQUÉ: ¡El Capitán! ¡Muerto! ¡Muerto!

(The liberated BLACKS respond in a frenzy, crying out "¡El Capitán! ¡Muerto!" and sometimes "¡libertad!" Then, as CINQUÉ stands before them all, seemingly invincible, they begin to chant again, but this time it's a much wilder song — an African victory chant. Then the MOONLIGHT fades out.)

**End of Prologue**

**ACT I**  
**Scene 1**

*(AT RISE: New Haven Jail, Connecticut, 1839. In the late afternoon, COLONEL PENDLETON, leads five well-dressed curiosity-seekers up the jailhouse corridor. As the THREE WOMEN and TWO MEN walk up the hallway, they look through the prison bars and see CINQUÉ and MARGRU inside the cell. Cinqué sits in the middle of the room staring out at the audience. He is wearing prison work pants, but no shirt, and his legs are chained. There's a very odd instrument resting on his head, and a PHRENOLOGIST is carefully taking his measurements. During the examination, Cinqué sits passively, yet with great dignity, allowing the man to go about his business. Nearby, little Margru plays on the floor with paper cutouts made from an old newspaper.)*

FEMALE VISITOR: *(Shocked.)* My God, is the little girl a cannibal?

PENDLETON: We can't be sure yet, ma'am.

*(PENDLETON speaks with authority as he leads the VISITORS up to the cell's main entrance, which he immediately opens with a key. Then, mostly for show, he removes the whip that's attached to his belt.)*

MALE VISITOR: *(Pointing at CINQUÉ.)* Is that him?

PENDLETON: Yes, sir, that's Cinqué himself, chief of the murderers. *(HE steps inside the cell, but only one of the wary VISITORS follows inside.)*

MALE VISITOR: Is it true that he cut off the captain's head and nailed it to the mast?

PENDLETON: From what I've learned, it's exactly true.

*(The VISITORS all stare at the African in amazement, but CINQUÉ pays them no attention. As the PHRENOLOGIST silently continues his work and the visitors watch, an unobserved, elderly man carrying a small black satchel, LEWIS TAPPAN, walks across the front of the stage and then turns down into the prison corridor. When he sees the spectators, he stops in astonishment, infuriated. At the same moment, Cinqué glances briefly at the five visitors, and even though his expression is perfectly impassive, they all back away. Showing off, PENDLETON cracks his whip, but Cinqué, undaunted, pays no attention. Only MARGRU is frightened.)*

FEMALE VISITOR: He's terrifying!

MALE VISITOR: Are you sure the chains are secure?

PENDLETON: I'm positive, sir.

TAPPAN: *(Angrily.)* What are you fools doing here? *(PENDLETON and the FIVE VISITORS look over at TAPPAN who walks up to the most flustered of the male spectators.)* How much for admission?

SECOND MALE VISITOR: *(Defensively.)* A shilling, sir, and worth every bit.

### **End of Freeview**

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