

THE CHARLES W. LENOX EXPERIENCE
by
Ken Green

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CHARLES LENOX: African American. Barber in the town of Watertown, Mass. Ages from 30s to mid 60s during the course of the play. Outgoing, friendly but determined in all he does. Strong sense of right, wrong and obligation.

(JOHN LENOX): African American, late 60s. Resident of Watertown, Mass. A serious businessman. Longtime barber in the town and considered an institution.

NOTE: The role of JOHN LENOX is played by the same actor, who is merely switching personas to indicate a different person.

ACT II

SETTING: April, 1863. The Lenox barbershop on Main Street, Watertown, Mass. CHARLES LENOX is in the shop preparing for the day's work. He tinkers, checks his tools, maybe straightens up things, then gets to work. (Staging note: Since this will take place on the street, the "shop" can merely be a chair placed on the sidewalk. The "customer" can be someone from the audience. While he might have barber tools - comb, scissors, etc. - he can merely mimic styling the "customers" hair.)

CHARLES

(looking around the "shop") Next? Who's next? Next customer, please. (picks someone from the audience) You next? (cheerfully) Alright then, have a seat, have a seat. (adjust customer in the chair) You look familiar, I seen you in here before? (no/yes) Well, either way, welcome to the Lenox barbershop. Best barbershop in town. We do it all - trims, sideburns, shaves. Even beards, 'thought we don't see too many of those these days. Name's Charles Lenox. I run this shop with my father, Mr. John Lenox. He usually here by now but... (looks around carefully) Well, he getting a little slow these days. (suddenly, but with a grin) Don't tell him I said that. He damn near seventy, but he can still put a whuppin' on you. He's a tough old man, I tell you that. Born right here in Watertown, in a house that sat right on the borderline with Newton. Had a this stone smack in the middle of the house to show where the line was. Can't get no more on-the-border than that. Opened his first barbershop in Eighteen-fifteen over near the old Spring Hotel. (taps his temple to indicate "smart") Got all the tourist trade as they came and went. Moved over here about twenty years later, right next to Town Hall. Again... (taps temple) All those politicians, lawyers, businessmen with important stuff to do a Town Hall wanna look their best when they go in and... Why, look over there, a barbershop! Became known the best hairdresser in Watertown. Which I guess makes me the second best. (smile, pause) My father is strictly business, though. He says...

(JOHN LENOX)

"... That politics stuff ain't for me. Working on a selectman's hair 'bout a close as I want to get to politics."

CHARLES

(to customers) And he don't really like political talk in the show either. He says...

(JOHN LENOX)

"...That kinda talk can angry up folks real quick. And gettin' angry ain't a good idea when you surrounded by razors and scissors."

(CHARLES LENOX laughs at his father's humor)

"Besides, that's white folks business 'round here. (pause) Not that I don't have opinions worth hearin'. But I'm here to cut hair, not bend somebody's ear about I think."

CHARLES

(to the customers) Not at the shop maybe. But he sure do save all them opinions up for when he gets home. Dinner be getting' cold waiting on him to finish with them opinions he been saving up all day. And these days, he got plenty opinions about the war. 'Specially now that they lettin' colored men can enlist. The other day he says...

(JOHN LENOX)

"The only reason Lincoln lettin' colored men enlist is the Union been taking a beating latterly. Murfreesboro... twenty-three thousand men killed. Fredericksburg...seventeen thousand. Antietam...twenty-three thousand in ONE DAY. Now, all of a sudden, colored boys good enough to fight?"

CHARLES

He calls it a white man's war. White men started it, he says, white men should end it.

(JOHN LENOX)

"They could end this whole war yesterday. Sign a damn piece of paper or something, set them slaves free and be done with it. They created the damned institution, let them end it."

CHARLES

I told him about an article Frederick Douglass wrote the other day, about how it's a colored man's duty to enlist and fight in the war.

(JOHN LENOX)

Frederick Douglass? You know he was in here the other day, right? Yeah, right here in this shop. THE Frederick Douglass. Didn't get no haircut or nothing, although he coulda used one, if you ask me. Said he was in town visiting them abolitionists, the William White family. Said he just stopped in to pay his respects. Now, I kept it civil, 'cause like I say, I don't like to talk politics in the shop. But I read that article he wrote 'bout why the colored man should enlist. He writin', 'Should you refuse to enlist now, you will justify the past contempt of the Government towards you. ...' Now what he mean by that?"

CHARLES

Now, see, it SOUND like he askin' a question, but, believe me, he 'bout to give you an answer.

(JOHN LENOX)

"So, if colored man don't enlist, the way they treat us is OUR fault? If a colored man don't fight, that make it OUR fault we couldn't vote or own property. That make it OUR fault our people are slaves? He out there telling colored boys if they fight, they gonna win the white man's respect. Where that guarantee? When they put THAT in the Constitution?"

CHARLES

(to JOHN LENOX) All that gotta start somewhere. I mean, first we gotta free our people down South.

(JOHN LENOX)

"And then what? Look, don't get me wrong, I like Douglas. He a smart man, lot smarter than me. But I'm smart enough to know ain't much worse than a free colored man findin' out he ain't really free. And a colored man enlisting in this white man's army ain't gon' earn nobody's respect. Just 'cause some boy shoots a Reb don't mean he gon' be a white man's equal."

CHARLES

It mighta been the wrong time on my part, but I reminded him that I was still thinkin' 'bout enlisting, and now that it's legal and all...

(JOHN LENOX)

(snapping) "You can do what you want, you a grown man. But I think you a damn fool. (pause) Don't look at me like I don' kicked your mule, you heard me. You all ginned up to fight the Rebs, thinkin' it's gonna make a difference. (getting emotional) We got us a good business here, boy. We respected in this town. Other day, somebody called us an "institution." And this a family business. I just got you and your sisters, so this place is gonna be yours after a while. You ain't got no need to go off and fight. You can do good right here. Be a respect colored man in Watertown. 'Stead of just another colored soldier."

(pause)

"Fighting for the Union might end slavery, but it ain't gonna end everything. But go on and enlist if you want. Like I say, you a grown man..."

CHARLES

I didn't tell him, but I already did. Enlisted the other day. Went over to Boston with a few other fellas and just... signed up. (trying to convince himself) I mean, it shouldn't be no surprise to him, I been talking about it for more than a year now. (trying to convince himself) Besides, I'm damn near forty and... I'm 'sposed to go to Camp Meigs down in Readville in a couple of days. (pulls out poster) But look here - you get thirteen dollars a month. (to townspeople) That's good money, right there, ain't it? (they acknowledge) Man can do a lot with thirteen dollars a month. Get yourself a couple of cows, some hogs, maybe a good work horse. Might even save enough to buy some land. The Army feed you, give you clothes for free. (getting a bit excited) Shoot, I be a fool NOT to sign up. AND they give you a hundred dollars after you come...home. (coming down and thinking) Yeah, he gon' be alright here by himself. My father started this business without me, he can keep it going 'til I get back. (pause) Think I'm gon' close up shop for the day. Thought my dad might come down but he been a little more tired these days. It's alright. After forty years, can't say he ain't earned to a day off. Think I'll take a walk 'round the town before I go home. Might not see the place for a while. If you wanna come with me, that'll be alright.

END SCENE

