



A NEW WEB SERIES ABOUT TIME TRAVEL ASKS A CONTROVERSIAL QUESTION

BY JENNY LOWER

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2016 | 15 DAYS AGO



Jasika Nicole plays Lila on *Send Me Back to Slavery*.

Courtesy the filmmakers

The urgent imperative behind the title of *Send Me Back to Slavery*, a new web series that [recently debuted on BET.com](#) to honor Black History Month, answers a question that seems almost too provocative to ask.

Assuming it were possible, why would any sane person want to return to such a godawful time? And what show creator would willingly open himself to the slew of accusations – of insensitivity, of sensationalism, of exploitation – such a premise would certainly send his way?

Such well-intentioned political correctness would sidestep the dialogue that creator Steve Harper hopes the series will inspire. After a two-year stint writing for the USA network's spy series *Covert Affairs*, the Los Angeles playwright and Juilliard graduate was eager to explore a world with a cultural texture more accessible to him. As a black man, he also wanted to create a series that would draw an audience into his own preoccupation with race.

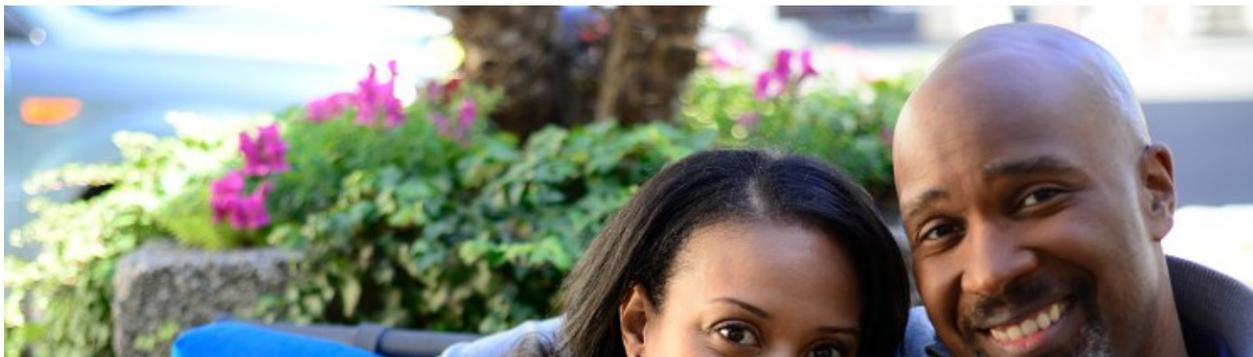
And as an aficionado of time-travel narratives, he was fascinated by how the genre's rules presuppose a degree of anonymity often denied to African-Americans.

"I've always been struck by how most of the time, the time travelers are white people. And if they end up in King Arthur's court or wherever, they can put on a hat and maybe a little accent, and they're undercover. But that would never be me. I could never do that."

When Harper first approached *Send Me*'s star Tracie Thoms, best known for *Cold Case*, *Rent* and *Looper*, she "was pretty sure he was insane," she says. According to Harper, before long, the actress's reaction shifted to "I can't stop thinking about this."

"I started asking real people, and the responses they gave me were so visceral," Thoms says. "Most emphatically said no, but some were just as emphatic about going. So I knew we had something special. And I knew I had to do it."

Thoms stars as Gwen, the many-greats-removed-granddaughter of a former slave who can send one willing participant back in time, for a price. Harper costars as her husband who resists the scheme. The main narrative, consisting of six three-minute episodes, takes place mostly in the couple's comic book shop, where they also interview prospective clients, including Tucker Smallwood from *The Sarah Silverman Program* and Jerrika Hinton of *Grey's Anatomy*. Jasika Nicole of *Scandal* and Gabrielle Carteris of *Beverly Hills, 90210* also appear. Sara Ramirez of *Grey's Anatomy* served as executive producer.





The web series *Send Me Back to Slavery* stars Tracie Thoms as a woman with the power to send people back in time to the plantation era. Creator Steve Harper co-stars as her resistant husband.

Candace Lauren Ostler

The contemporary setting was partially a product of budget constraints, which Harper knew would make it “tricky to do the full-blown antebellum experience.” The whole series was filmed and produced in Los Angeles for about \$50,000, mostly fundraised from an Indiegogo campaign whose backers included Chris Rock. The modern setting, intercut with flashbacks to the past, allowed for a lighter touch, including a running subplot with a goofy shop assistant named Trevor.

The first season also features 11 supplementary interviews with characters replying to an anonymous Craigslist posting asking whether they would go back. By turns raw, intimate and confessional, the speakers peer earnestly into their iPhone cameras, voicing a patchwork of uncertainty and rationales: the opportunity to connect with ancestors, insecurity from having been told they weren’t “black enough,” the moral imperative to “go all Django” on white people. And an appeal to remove the posting because we live in a post-racial society, so let’s move on already.

Presenting characters “who were not at all monolithic” in their opinions was part of the project’s appeal, Harper says. And the time-travel element lets the series participate in the ongoing dialogue over race in the United States by literalizing the hold that slavery has over the present.

“The large theme is that [slavery] is in us. It goes where we go, and we go where it goes, and it’s still there. To me, that’s really apt,” he says.

Send Me Back to Slavery is [available on BET.com](http://www.bet.com) through the end of February.

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