

# THE MOMENT WAS NOW

## ANNOTATED SCENES

### ACT I

#### Opening Song

#### SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY

This song sets the tone and the context for the rest of the show. Set in the present, the ideas and tensions of the Reconstruction Era that will be central to the story are revealed in the lyrics. The song, sung by students for their college class, ends with the call to “Let America be all that it can be.”

#### Scene I

#### THE CLASSROOM

The play opens in a college classroom. The professor discusses Reconstruction with the same students who had just completed the opening song as part of their classroom assignment for a combined history and theater program. The professor says the song does not go far enough. He tells them to try again, add some depth to their presentation and show who were the movers and shakers in the Reconstruction Era.

#### Scene II

#### RECONSTRUCTION WHAT?

The students respond to the professor by creating a rap to explain the Reconstruction Era. They end with the question: “What if American had done the right thing?” Following this scene, the students and the professor take on the roles of the historical characters of the Reconstruction Era.

#### Scene III

#### MY GREAT HOPE

Frederick Douglass gives a speech in 1869 in Baltimore about the emerging Reconstruction era-the dangers and possibilities. He introduces three of the main characters: William Sylvis, white trade union leader; Isaac Myers, Black trade union leader; and Susan B. Anthony, white suffragette and abolitionist. He asks them to meet and try to build a unified movement for justice at this historical turning point, while he goes to meet with President Grant. As he leaves, Frances Harper, an African American author and abolitionist, comes forward, unseen by Douglass, announces herself and joins the meeting.

#### Scene IV

#### I WANT IT ALL

The four assemble and William Sylvis starts the discussion, having invited the others to join him for the occasion of the National Labor Union (NLU) convention in Baltimore. He sings about the need to create a cooperative world by building a massive labor

movement that seizes power from the Wall Street capitalists. The other three characters join him in singing “I want it all” at the conclusion of the song.

Scene V

DOES YOUR WE INCLUDE ME?

Isaac Myers, asked by Sylvis to speak at the NLU convention, responds to Sylvis’s song by telling the story of when Black workers were driven from the Baltimore shipyard by white workers who will be at the convention. He asks Sylvis “Does your we include me?”

Scene VI

WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY

Susan B. Anthony tells Sylvis about the difficult situation many poor women face across the country and she criticizes the NLU for not including women and threatening to exclude her as a representative of women workers. She warns him, with Frances’ support, that “absent the women, you have only half the might.”

A’INT I A WOMAN

Frances, echoing words spoken by Sojourner Truth, sings from the point of view of Black women, exclaiming that “when women get their rights, day and night, there’ll be peace on earth, good will to men.”

Scene VII

WE OWN AMERICA

The characters retreat into a private conversation about why Sylvis bothered to invite them to this meeting, given all the problems with their inclusion. Unseen to them, Jay Gould, a white railroad kingpin and robber baron in that era, comes front and center and says, arrogantly, that the captains of industry own America. He sings “We got it, we bought it and we intend to keep it.”

Scene VIII

EQUAL FOOTING

Sylvis responds to the doubts of the other three by calling for workers unity. But he also tells of his recent trip to the south, describing Reconstruction and the Freedmen’s Bureau as a scandalous use of taxpayer’s money, the “poison in the pudding.” He advocates closing the Bureau and putting all workers on “equal footing.” Frances and Isaac respond angrily saying there is no equal footing between northern white workers and southern formerly enslaved workers. They sing “It’s either unity for justice, or just us.” Sylvis’ racist attitudes are revealed and the argument intensifies.

### WE CAN'T WAIT

Myers, very upset with Sylvis's ideas, sings about how Black workers have been waiting for justice for 250 years and that "we can't wait no more" for the basic rights to "work and rise" for themselves and their children. The first act ends as Myers storms out of the room.

## ACT II

### Scene IX

#### DEFIANCE AND ALLIANCE

Act II opens with the four continuing the argument for unity but at the same time emphasizing their differing points of view. Sylvis calls for a "southern workers' alliance," Frances and Isaac insist that "Reconstruction is the essence of defiance," and Susan says "women will never more be silenced."

#### WHOSE HOUR IS IT?

Susan responds, saying that the arguments about the North and South ignore the situation of women. She declares that the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, giving Black men the right to vote, should not prevail if it doesn't include the right for women to vote as well. She calls for "suffrage for all or for none." Isaac and Frances strongly disagree.

#### NOT A STRAW IN THE WAY

Frances responds to Susan, accusing the white women's suffrage movement of demonizing Black men to justify their opposition to the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment for not including women. She explains that Black women can't separate race from sex, and that Black women won't put a "straw in the way" of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and will "stand with our brothers."

### Scene X

#### DESTINY

Sylvis responds with another call for unity, saying that only a labor party can unite all workers and fight against the corruption of the two political parties. Isaac and Frances oppose this idea and explain that without the support of the Republican party the slaveowners will return to power.

### Scene XI

#### UP IN THE SKY

Susan explains to Sylvis that the NLU does not have nearly enough members to compete against the two political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans and describes his ideas as "up in the sky, not down on the ground." In a desperate search for unity she suggests they all support cooperatives.

### MAYBE WE GOT IT

Relieved, they all agree that cooperatives might be the way forward.

### DELUDED FOOLS

Gould, listening, comes forward, unseen by the others, and insists that “I won’t let it work.” He mocks them as “four deluded fools,” who argue while the ruling class enriches itself and builds power.

### SPINNING NOT WINNING

William returns to his argument that a labor party is needed so that the “wealth of the state” can be used to promote cooperatives. Unity is eluded once again and the four sing that “we keep arguing and they keep winning.” Susan, speaking as if to Frederick Douglass, says: “Fredrick, I fear we have failed you.”

## Scene XII

### THE MOMENT THAT WAS

The time moves forward to 1893 with Frederick Douglass looking back, disappointed, on the failed opportunity to build a unified movement for justice in 1869. But he starts to imagine what could have happened, exclaiming that “America almost did the right thing.”

## Scene XIII

### JOY IS IN MY HEART

Douglass’s fantasy brings him back to his role as the professor and he engages the four students as their characters transition back to their classroom identity. The professor congratulates each student as if they had gone beyond the limits of their characters and taken the path toward genuine unity. He gives them each an A+ and they sing joyfully about “seizing the opportunity to capture the unity of the human community.”

## Finale

### LET AMERICA BE ALL THAT IT CAN BE

In the final song the students and the professor call for America to be “all that it can be,” and repeat Douglass’s famous lines affirming that “power concedes nothing without a demand.”