



Based on Andrew Ward's epic "Dark Midnight When I Rise," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **George White, Ella Sheppard** and **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**, a spectacular choir of young former slaves fighting the KKK's reign of terror against their schools not with bullets or bombs but sensational songs of faith and freedom. *Steal Away* follows the choir's titanic rise from the darkness of slavery to the glittering ballrooms and throne rooms of Europe as they conquer the world... and must then conquer their own demons.

One of the most breathtaking stories ever known, *Steal Away* will feature a spectacularly diverse international cast, the strongest Black female lead ever onscreen, and a sweeping soundtrack by multi-Grammy winning composer **Billy Childs**.

## **MILO CRAVATH**

Caucasian, 60s, a militant, hawkish, notoriously unsentimental abolitionist -- although his physicality and facial features don't necessarily appear imposing (see below).

Civil rights crusader Cravath is the fearsome Director of the American Missionary Association (AMA). His lifelong war against Southern supremacism and their armies of terror has shaped him into a hard-charging war hawk that some liken to Genghis Khan.

Cravath's take-no-prisoners crusade mercilessly enslaves the Fisk Jubilee Singers that are touring for his cause, driving them to the brink of destruction and death, and making Cravath look like the very enemy he's fighting.

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

It might be tempting to read Cravath as heartless and uncaring, especially in the last monologue below, but his intensely sensitive eyes and moving backstory tell a far deeper story.

A fiery abolitionist and enemy of oppression that has long fought and bled for a colorblind nation, Cravath's commitment to equality is beyond question. But the Knights' murderous reign of terror against African-American schools has profoundly upped the stakes in the war against oppression.

Cravath sees himself as a do-or-die commander in a just and dire war - he'd march you, or himself, into cannon fire if it would advance the cause of Freedom. This conflict - the willingness to sacrifice humans in the name of humanity - is an inner torture that, if we look carefully, we might read in Cravath's eyes.

**Note:** We may cast Cravath against type -- i.e., we might cast for a *slight* build and *unassuming* facial features so that Cravath's raging explosion at the end of Act 2 takes absolutely everybody by surprise.

# "MILo CRAVATH

33.

12/14/21

EXT. FISK CAMPUS - NEXT DAY

SCENE 1

A horrific devastation. Buildings smolder. Black effigies hang lynched from trees. Prophetic graffiti vows a coming apocalypse. We PAN ACROSS the ruins to the site of an old excavated --

AUCTION BLOCK

-- where mountains of chains and manacles have been unearthed.

An emergency meeting is taking place here. Fisk's shell-shocked students are gathered before an imposing executive - MILO CRAVATH (Caucasian, 60s) - an unsentimental war hawk with intensely sensitive eyes. Beside him is a sharply-dressed WOMAN.

CRAVATH

Milo Cravath, AMA Headquarters. My deputy and I are just in from New York. The faculty have been briefed on the purpose of this meeting.

The red-eyed faculty clasp hands. Just then, White, Ella and the choir truantly arrive, drawing scowls. Cravath growls and goes on.

CRAVATH

Army Ops confirms what we already know: last night was arson. They're doubtful, however, they'll ever ID the attackers.

A STUDENT shouts --

STUDENT

It was that church mob!

The students CLAMOR in agreement. The woman with Cravath speaks up.

SUSAN

That was no mere mob; it was a *militia*.

CRAVATH

My deputy, Susan Gilbert.

The crackerjack SUSAN GILBERT (Caucasian, 40s) is a bold, beautiful, badass operative sporting aggressive pinstripes.

WHITE

Militia?? What's this about?

SUSAN

*Turning back the clock.* The Southern Cross is more than a denomination, it's the raging emblem of a vast and savage empire that took its last bow;  
(MORE)

115

SUSAN (CONT'D)

its churches cauldrons of hate over  
the end of their terrorist  
civilization, a barbaric land of  
cavaliers and cottonfields that,  
thank God, is gone with the wind.  
Emancipation cost the Old South  
power, pride, and four billion  
dollars in human flesh. *They're*  
*rising up to take it back.*

BENNIE

Take what back?

SUSAN

You. Across the South, sons of the  
Southern Cross are mobilizing to take  
the elections... and take back their  
slaves.

The students CLAMOR - "Slaves?!"

AMERICA

That's impossible; the 13th Amendment  
abolishes slavery --

SUSAN

"*Except as punishment for crime.*" I make  
you a criminal, I make you my slave.

MINNIE

Even if they take back power, how do  
you criminalize a race of people?

SUSAN

I arrest you for standing on a sidewalk  
if you're the wrong color, then condemn  
you to life as *convict labor* in my  
factories and mines. Under their laws,  
black men and boys will be snatched  
from streets, tortured in boiler rooms  
and caves until their bodies break,  
then fed to the furnaces and replaced.

GEORGIA

Death camps!

SUSAN

Slavery, reinvented.

ELLA

(getting the big picture)  
To rule us they need *mules*, not thinking  
minds. Not Fisk. Last night was an act  
of war.

WHITE  
So we rebuild. Now.

Cravath takes a bitter breath.

CRAVATH  
We can't. Not *this*, not with the AMA's swelling debt and shrinking credit. I'm afraid they struck the jugular.

WHITE  
Translate.

CRAVATH  
Fisk is shutting down.

*SHOCKWAVES* - the students EXPLODE in an uproar. The faculty weep. White visibly freaks out. Cravath presses on with business.

CRAVATH  
We'll sleep students at the shelter tonight. Return here at 7AM for final instructions. It is finished.

White goes ballistic, and we

CUT TO:

#### WHITE DOGGING CRAVATH ACROSS CAMPUS

START → WHITE  
What the hell?!

**CRAVATH**  
This is just the beginning; they're going to attack us on every front until *every* campus is in ruins! We're in survival mode!

WHITE  
Don't take the bait! ~~They attacked Fisk because it's the best; they know if Fisk falls it all falls!~~ We've got to fight back!

**CRAVATH**  
With what, *ash*? Our dorms and classrooms are rubble!

WHITE  
We use the old slave barracks!

**CRAVATH**  
Impossible! It's condemned!

WHITE

But intact! We house students there,  
move classes to the field!

CRAVATH

The open field, in this coming winter?!  
What part of *impossible* don't you ever  
get? We move on to move up!

WHITE

I never heard *defeat* so nobly defended!  
~~What happened to the fighter that~~  
~~founded Fisk out of his own pocket?~~  
~~That made it a great university?~~  
~~Impossible is devil's talk!~~ Don't  
crumble! Don't crucify the Dream!

*That's it!* As they barge into a --

#### CONFERENCE ROOM

-- Cravath SLAMS White into a wall map of the UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.

CRAVATH

Don't lecture me on the Dream! I  
was raised there, on the Underground  
Railroad; our home was a safe house  
for escaping slaves! My parents died  
defending the Dream and I vowed to God  
the same - I beg him every hour to  
make me half of what they were! I  
love Fisk, but if sacrificing it means  
saving the Dream, I'll slaughter it  
without blinking!

Ella and Susan rush in --

ELLA and SUSAN  
Mr. Cravath!

-- snapping him out of his fury.

We shudder at Cravath's anger; he's a powderkeg of pent-up rage.  
He unthrottles White and slumps into a chair, clutching his head as  
if it were being jackhammered. Then he catches his breath... calms  
his shaking hands... and looks ruefully out at the campus.

CRAVATH

These lowlands were the worst site for  
a campus anyway; the vermin sickened  
our students and rotted every building.  
(then, back to business)  
And shut down that choir.

ELLA  
Excuse me??

(CRAVATH)  
No German requiems as Fisk shutters.  
Your little circus act has been the  
bane of this faculty's existence.

Susan's eyes glint to realize --

SUSAN  
You're George White?

White nods cluelessly. Her eyes sweep him as if beholding a myth.

ELLA  
What do they say about the choir?

Cravath shoots Susan a *this one's on you* look.

ELLA  
Miss Gilbert? Your reputation as  
Mr. Cravath's "assassin" precedes  
you. I'll expect your candor.

Susan looks flustered, but owning her job, she toughens up and spews it out...

SUSAN  
They say the choir is a disgrace and  
an embarrassment to Fisk. That its  
director is a dangerous visionary, a  
blind stargazer, a huckster of lies  
and false hope. That the choir is a  
salve for his guilt over a lost love.  
That you're a family of *misfits* -  
damned by nightmares, driven by far-  
off dreams - singing of distant lives  
and lands to escape your own. That  
it's all... *pathetic*.

... detesting every word. White and Ella trade staggered looks.

ELLA  
Why didn't you shut us down before?

(CRAVATH)  
Oh, I ordered the hit. Then the  
darndest thing happened: My "assassin"  
reviews White's personal file, and for  
reasons that defy reason finds in  
those tortured pages not a madman but  
a misunderstood genius - a dangerous  
visionary in the *best* sense.

(MORE)

**(CRAVATH) (CONT'D)**

At which point she becomes his fist-and-knuckles *defender* at headquarters and tenders her resignation effective the moment anyone lays a hand on his choir. This without having laid eyes on the man until twenty minutes ago.

SUSAN

(fights blushing)

Distant impressions...

**(CRAVATH)**

Because her loss to the AMA would be catastrophic, the answer to your question is... *blackmail*.

Susan and White trade gazes. Deep, probing gazes. And in their gaze we'd swear time stopped. We gaze at Susan, past the pinstripes and pumps, and discover soft, searching eyes. We like her... but White is breathing and sweating uneasily.

Suddenly, White's eyes spark. He snaps back to the map.

WHITE

What would it take to rebuild?

**(CRAVATH)**

This sinkhole? Thousands, might as well be millions.

White stares at the Underground Railroad, transfixed. Entranced, he runs a finger along its northward routes as if tracing a journey.

His eyes flare with a vision.

WHITE

Don't count Fisk out, Milo. The Dream, the struggle - we've got a part to play in it.

**(CRAVATH)**

Good grief, another prophecy.

WHITE

God speaks!

**(CRAVATH)**

To you more than Moses, only the Red Sea never actually parts for you, does it? You and your fantasias -- voices on the wind, singing temples, globetrotting crusades. Poor Laura... Careful, or you're headed for another breakdown. You wage war on reality.

6/15

ELLA and SUSAN  
Great men wage war on reality.

Ella and Susan trade looks. Cravath shakes his head.

(CRAVATH)  
Be on time for the closure tomorrow.

WHITE  
For God's sake, Milo --

(CRAVATH)  
It is finished.

INT. CHOIR ROOM - THAT NIGHT

END

Devastated at the news, the singers mill about the room grimly as if in a bomb shelter awaiting the end. Meanwhile, HEAVY WINDS batter the windows insistently as if to get their attention.

White and Ella are off to themselves playing a solemn violin-piano duet. He looks preoccupied, and her playing is too rigid for him.

WHITE  
Let it breathe, Sam.

ELLA  
She looked at you.

WHITE  
Forget the metronome; feel the music.

ELLA  
You traded looks. Yours said "Have we met?" Hers said "Do dreams count?"

WHITE  
(breaks into a sweat)  
Sam...

ELLA  
Live again, Mr. White. The past is past; what happened with Laura --

The bow drops from his hand. He's hyperventilating.

ELLA  
Mr. White!

She swings him onto the bench and helps him --

ELLA  
Breathe... breathe...

7/15

Never a rebel at heart, Bennie sighs. The Manager reenters.

MANAGER  
They're restless.

ELLA  
(confident)  
Let's do this.

SCENE 2

STANLT → HOLD IT!

The door BLASTS OPEN. In blows Cravath with a QUINTET OF BLACK SINGERS in overcoats. No one can believe their eyes; it's --

MINNIE  
The Blackfoots!

CRAVATH  
Dressing rooms, hurry!

The Blackfoots exit. Everyone freaks out.

WHITE  
You brought *them* here?!

CRAVATH  
Straight from New York. Fresh blood, a stable full. They've got your songs down to the last note; they're joining this tour.

TOM  
You grind us to dust then freshen up the act with *minstrels*?!

CRAVATH  
This tour will never again be held hostage to sickness... or treason.

Suddenly, Cravath totters then catches himself. True to Susan's words, he looks sickly and unstable.

The Blackfoots return in costume looking like Jubilee clones, only fresh and perky. The sight sickens everyone.

CRAVATH  
Splendid. Miss Sheppard?

Incredulous eyes turn to Ella.

MINNIE  
Y-you knew about this?? You're taking them onstage?!

CLOSE ON ELLA - Her hands shake, her mortified face beads with sweat. We sense her sanity and strength cracking, but she pulls back from the brink and calls to the rafters.

ELLA

Mr. Dunham, we need two more keylights.  
Fire up four and seven...

WHITE

Have you sold your soul?!

ELLA

(shutting out tre voices)  
Stipple lenses, pale amber frost...

Loyal until now, Tom LUNGES up to Cravath.

TOM

Three weeks my ass, Cravath! When does this end?!

**(CRAVATH)**

Get on that stage.

TOM

I asked you a question!!

**(CRAVATH)**

You're not being paid to demand answers!  
*Gutless hypocrites!* You call yourselves soldiers then faint when the wind blows!

TOM

(GRABS HIM by the collar)  
You bastard! ~~We've been in these trenches from Day One!~~ ~~We've fought, fallen, then dredged ourselves from gurneys to fight on!~~ Bennie won't see another birthday! When's enough enough for you, when we're all laid out at the morgue?!

**(CRAVATH)**

Not even then! This choir will outlive every one of you!

TOM

(CLUTCHES his throat)  
~~HEARTLESS PRICK!~~ LAST CHANCE - WHEN DOES THIS DAMNED TOUR END?

**(CRAVATH)**

(choking)  
J-Jubilee H-hall is almost buil--

TOM  
 (TIGHTENS his grip)  
 LYING CROOK!

CRAVATH  
 J-just w-windows, d-doors --

TOM  
 FINISH THAT AND YOU DIE! WHEN WILL  
 JUBILEE HALL BE DONE? WHEN?! WHEN?!

Tom CRUSHES his throat - fury makes him a powerhouse. The tension is nuclear. Cravath holds out until a moment from death, then --

CRAVATH  
THERE IS NO JUBILEE HALL!

The news EXPLODES like a bombshell. Furious SHOUTS and ACCUSATIONS. White and the choir reel in disbelief. Ella slumps to the ground.

Once a trusting angel, Minnie EXPLODES with rage.

MINNIE  
 You monster! You aborted construction!

CRAVATH  
 We were building Jubilee Hall, delays and all. But Julia Hayden's murder changed everything; it was a grim wake-up call as to how vulnerable our people were. To keep our campuses from becoming killing fields - to defend them "by any means necessary" - we needed vastly more munitions, fortifications, patrols. The depression had bankrupted the AMA, so I did what I had to!

MINNIE  
 I don't believe a word you say! Our Monument to Freedom, to inspire voters --

CRAVATH  
 The dead don't vote!

MINNIE  
Stop the scare tactics!

CRAVATH  
 Scare tactics?! The South you left is a human slaughterhouse!

TOM  
 You strung us along! You should have told us what was going on!

CRAVATH

So you could faint into your caviar,  
or desert your post to go "tanning in  
Nice"?! You needed blinders! The  
AMA --

LOUDIN

To hell with the AMA! We've sacrificed  
enough for you!

CRAVATH

For *me*?! Look at my skin! This is  
the color of *freedom*! My people will  
always, effortlessly be free - there's  
no shadow of turning with a white  
man's freedom! It's your people that  
Southern Cross is set to annihilate!  
We're here to stop a holocaust!

Bennie bites the bullet.

BENNIE

All right, I'll stick it out. Just a  
few days rest.

CRAVATH

Not on your life.

BENNIE

(points to the Blackfeet)  
You've got your "steeds"! We're rebels.

CRAVATH

I don't care if you're cancer itself.  
They're filler; you're purebreds -  
original Jubilees! It's your pedigree  
the public pays for! Until I say "It is  
finished," you're chained to this tour!

BENNIE

~~You bastard!~~ I am taking this public;  
I'm going to destroy the AMA!

CRAVATH

Wake up - you are the AMA! Your fat  
paychecks authenticate everything we  
do! Heaven forbid Vetter gets proof  
your *let's-put-Marie-Antoinette-to-*  
*shame* lifestyles were funded by  
donations. How else could we afford  
those ungodly salaries you extorted  
from us?! Now get over your pity  
party and take to that stage! And  
clean up those sorry faces!

MINNIE  
You want our smiles, you devil?!

**(CRAVATH)**  
I WANT YOUR DENTURES!! God help me  
that curtain's about to rise, and  
I'll be damned if it reveals a band  
of sniveling weaklings!

MINNIE  
And what will it reveal?!

**(CRAVATH)**  
STAND DOWN, TATE!

MINNIE  
Answer me!

**(CRAVATH)**  
JUST WHAT I BOUGHT!

MINNIE  
And what's that, you shit, you tyrant  
piece of shit! Just what did you "buy"?!

**(CRAVATH)**  
A GLOWING, RADIANT CHOIR - VIBRANT AS  
SPRING, FRESH AS WINTER'S WIND! AND ON  
HER CUE, YOU WILL OPEN THOSE INFERNAL  
MOUTHS AND PRODUCE HEAVENLY SOUNDS -  
FACES SHIMMERING, EYES GLEAMING, YOUR  
WHOLE WRETCHED ESSENCE EXUDING JOY! HOW  
YOU ACHIEVE THAT EFFECT OR HOW EXTRINSIC  
IT IS TO YOUR NATURE OR CIRCUMSTANCES I  
COULDN'T CARE LESS! YOU WILL RAISE THAT  
ROOF, BRING DOWN THE HOUSE, THEN WHILE  
MISS GILBERT CHARMS THE STING OUT OF  
GLADSTONE MAKE A BEELINE FOR THE  
GREENROOM AND BLITZ THOSE REPORTERS WITH  
A BATTERY OF WINSOME INTERVIEWS IN WHICH  
EVERY WORD OUT OF THOSE CANTANKEROUS  
THROATS REVERBERATES WITH THE HARMONY OF  
EDEN AND A MENDELSSOHNIAN CHORUS OF  
PRAISE FOR THE AMA, AFTER WHICH YOU WILL  
DRAG THOSE WHINY BACKSIDES TO THE HOTEL,  
PACK, AND AT FOURTEEN HUNDRED HOURS BOARD  
THE SS SCHWITZEN FOR THE CONTINENT!

WHITE  
~~You son of a bitch!~~ I won't let you --

**(CRAVATH)**  
(to SECURITY)  
GET HIM OUT!

WHITE  
What's the meaning of this?!

**CRAVATH**  
You have no meaning - you've been out  
of a job all year! Ask Miss Sheppard!

WHITE  
*Ella??*

Ella flushes with horror. White's eyes beg her to refute it, but she can't even look at him.

**CRAVATH**  
NOW! I'M PAYING FOR THIS!

Ella SHRIEKS as guards SEIZE and HAUL White out to the curb. As the door SLAMS SHUT, he furiously POUNDS and SHOUTS --

WHITE (O.S.)  
ELLA! ELLA! ELLA!!

Cravath's glare turns to Ella.

**CRAVATH**  
Start this show, Miss Sheppard.

But Ella is dying. Destroyed inside and out, she clutches herself fetally on the floor, her mind and body gravely deteriorating.

Cravath circles his prey.

**CRAVATH**  
Up, Ella! She expects great things  
of you; don't crawl back with empty  
hands!

ELLA  
(CLUTCHING her head)  
*STOP!! STOP!!*

**CRAVATH**  
(points to the curtain)  
All the world is out there! Conquer  
the world and even she can't deny  
your worth!

Swooning with vertigo, Ella CLUTCHES HER HEAD as if shrapnel were blasting through it.

AMERICA  
LEAVE HER ALONE!

She runs to Ella, but Cravath grabs a STEEL PIPE and BEATS HER BACK.

**CRAVATH**

This is the endgame, Ella - the Knights are butchering thousands and chanting for Hiram's head! They're plotting an all-out apocalypse in Nashville! Only you can stop the bloodbath!

Blacking out, her mind spirals violently out of control.

**CRAVATH**

FAIL, AND THE BLOOD OF THOUSANDS IS ON YOUR HANDS! FAIL, AND THE DREAM DIES ON YOUR WATCH! FAIL, AND SHE SEES YOU FOR WHAT YOU ARE! GET UP, ELLA!!

Her head EXPLODES in a HORRIFIC NIGHTMARE:

**SLAUGHTER. SCREAMS. RIVERS OF BLOOD. TORTURED FACES SHOUTING "GET UP!" HIRAM'S AND JULIA'S BLOODIED FACES SHRIEKING "GET UP!" THOUSANDS OF FACES BEYOND THE CURTAIN THUNDERING "GET UP, ELLA, GET UP!"**

Terror-struck, Ella hoists herself onto her brittle arms, but SWOONS and CRASHES DOWN. Cravath ERUPTS LIKE A VOLCANO; he BASHES THE FLOOR BESIDE HER with the PIPE -- **WHACK!!**

ELLA

AAAAAUUUUUGHHH!!!!**CRAVATH**

SHE KNEW YOUR BIRTH WAS A BLIGHT ON THIS EARTH!! **WHACK!!** SHE DROWNED YOU ONCE!! **WHACK!!** BETRAY HER NOW AND SHE'LL DISOWN YOU FOREVER!!

**WHACK WHACK!!** She SCREAMS for him to stop, but he BLUDGEONS AWAY relentlessly -- **WHACK WHACK WHACK!!**

Cops rush backstage but Cravath rabidly BEATS THEM BACK.

SHRIEKING HYSTERICALLY, Ella deliriously tries to get back up --

ELLA

GET UP, ELLA! GET UP!

**CRAVATH**

REDEEM YOURSELF!! **WHACK WHACK!!**  
THE ONLY WAY BACK TO HER IS THROUGH THAT CURTAIN! GET THOSE BODIES ON THAT STAGE! **WHACK WHACK WHACK!!**

Her heart BLASTING OUT OF HER CHEST, she SCREAMS at her broken body to rise --

ELLA  
~~DAMN YOU, ELLA!! STAND TO YOUR FEET!!~~

-- but again buckles. CRAVATH GOES BALLISTIC. RAGING OUT OF HIS MIND, HE BASHERS EVERYTHING IN SIGHT -- **SMASH WHACK CRASH!!** -- DEMOLISHING THE THEATRE. LIGHTS EXPLODE, BREAKERS SMASH, GLASS AND STEEL CASCADE LIKE RAIN. **CRASH SMASH WHACK!!**

Heaving and convulsing, Ella curses herself like a dying horse --

ELLA  
~~GET UP, GOD DAMN YOU!! YOU WORTHLESS TRASH, YOU GODDAMNED WORTHLESS TRASH!!~~

**(CRAVATH)**  
DON'T GIVE OUT, YOU COWARD! START THIS SHOW OR I'LL DAMN YOUR LIVES TO OBLIVION! **CRASH SMASH WHACK!!**  
THOSE CONTRACTS ARE MY TITLE DEED TO YOUR HIDES! THEY GRANT ME YOUR VOICES, YOUR BODIES, AND YOUR UNWAVERING OBEDIENCE!! **WHACK CRASH SMASH!!**  
I BOUGHT YOU! I OWN YOU! *YOU'RE MY GODDAMNED PROPERTY!*

-- but unable able to bear the weight any longer, she collapses in a heap, destroyed. Cravath SPITS at the corpse.

**(CRAVATH)**  
CRAVEN!

We hear an OCEAN OF GASPS. Cravath spins around. Tom has raised the curtain on his rampage; the audience has witnessed it all.

Gladstone and Vetter look on incredulously. Susan weeps uncontrollably. White still POUNDS and SHOUTS Ella's name from outside. The cops SEIZE Cravath and SLAM him to the floor.

But one man savors the carnage. Jonas Stone watches the debacle as if it were a feast. Pleased, he takes out his tablet, ponders just the right phrasing, then jots down the title of his new article:

"IT IS FINISHED."

As he underlines these words, we PULL BACK to a WIDE SHOT of the demolished stage... and the smoldering wreckage that had been the Jubilee Singers.

CUT TO BLACK... THEN SLOW FADE UP TO:

GND

15/15