Mystic Drama About Two Harriets: Tubman And Beecher Stowe

Staging works about anti-slavery activists Harriet Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe

By Kristina Dorsey Published on 3/24/2009

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Camilla Ross, left, and Emma Palzere-Rae play the lead roles of Harriet Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the Emerson Theater Collaborative's production of"Harriet2" (Harriet squared) at Union Baptist Church, Mystic.

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This is a tale of two Harriets.

They were united not only by name but by cause: ending slavery.

They were Harriet Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Emerson Theater Collaborative is bringing together two one-woman, one-act plays about them in "Harriet2" (Harriet squared).

Tubman was a fugitive slave who helped other slaves escape through her heroic efforts. Stowe was the abolitionist who became famous for her novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

EMERSONIAN THEORY

This is the Emerson Theater Collaborative's third show. It all began with "Doubt" back in August, followed by performer Albert Cremin bringing his show "Introducing Mr. Charles Dickens" to Mystic in November and December.

The theater group, based in southeastern Connecticut, strives to stage innovative theater tackling timely issues. Diversity is a key as well.

As for the troupe's name, several members of the group - including Emma Palzere-Rae and Camilla Ross - graduated from Emerson College in Boston.

Here's how "Harriet2" came about: Emma Palzere-Rae originally created "Aunt Hattie's House" nine years ago. When she and her fellow members of the Emerson Theater Collaborative began discussing potential future shows, the idea was born to match that piece with a new one about another figure they found fascinating - Harriet Tubman.

Emerson board member Lisa Giordano then wrote "Harriet Tubman's Dream," with the idea that Emerson president and co-founder Camilla Ross would perform it.

During a break in rehearsals, Ross discussed Tubman,

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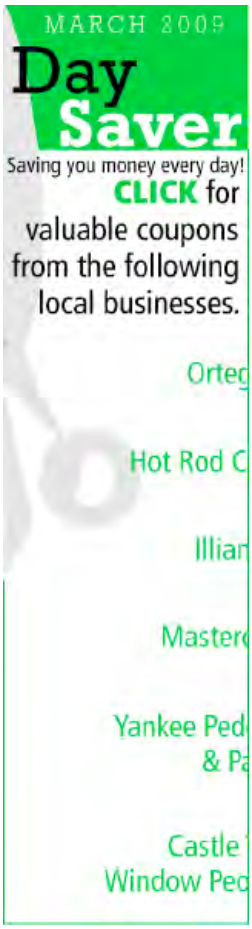

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saying, "The things she did are amazing. You can imagine yourself having to go through what she went through for survival - being hunted down. How would that make you feel?"

Tubman personally helped to save more than 70 slaves on 13 missions she undertook, with the help of the Underground Railroad. Beyond that, she provided assistance so that 60 additional slaves could plan their own escapes. She volunteered as a nurse, scout and spy for the Union Army during the Civil War.

"She was a large figure in her life," Ross says.

And portraying Tubman, she says, "has been exciting. It's a wonderful challenge."

Ross studied with the Actor's Workshop of Boston and is the theatical adviser and acting coach for the SPAG Players at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: *Emerson Theater Collaborative's "Harriet"*

WHEN: *8 p.m. Fri. and Sat., 4 p.m. Sun.*

WHERE: *Union Baptist Church, 119 High St., Mystic*

COST: *$20, $18 students, seniors*

CONTACT: *705-9711*

Palzere-Rae, who has appeared Off-Broadway and at regional and stock theaters, actually worked at the Harriet Beecher Stowe house in Hartford. She grew up in that area and would lead tours when she came home during college and between theater gigs.

Later on, she created "Aunt Hattie's House." Palzere-Rae, who had just had her son when she originally began working on the piece, says Stowe was focused on family, too, "trying to write and earn money, raising seven kids. So that became very contemporary for me, like she was a 19th-century working mom. Unlike a lot of people in her circle, she really needed the money. Her husband was a theologian, so he was working, but he wasn't really covering the cost of having so many children."

Palzere-Rae says that Stowe - an abolitionist - had a "driving force of compassion for humanity and justice."

"Uncle Tom's Cabin" was greatly influential when it was published in 1852, spurring on the abolitionist movement by showing lives lived under the scourge of slavery. One possibly apocryphal story has it that, after the start of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln greeted Stowe by saying, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

The success was such that "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was merchandised - with the characters featured on plates, wallpaper, candy wrappers - and it was translated into virtually every language. Back then, there was no copyright protection, so anyone could take a work and translate it or find ways to merchandise it. For authors like Stowe, the only income came from the original publisher.

In the years since then, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" has become almost less well known for how important it was than how it helped to create stereotypes, such as the image of a kowtowing Uncle Tom.

Palzere-Rae says, "Really, she created a Christ figure who was an African. For somebody to think in that way at that time was pretty remarkable - that she chose to make the most holy character in the book a slave. That's entirely where she was coming from. The suffering was not someone being passive and taking it, other than in the way that Christ would have. So to her, Tom was a very revered person."

Mystic, CT

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