

Excerpt terms and conditions



This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

You may view, print and download any of our excerpts for perusal purposes.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest reading the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

Dramatic Publishing

A MIDNIGHT CRY

The Underground Railroad to Freedom

A Musical
by
JAMES DEVITA

With musical selections and arrangements by
JOSH SCHMIDT

Additional selections and arrangements by
SHERI WILLIAMS PANELL



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our Web site: www.dramaticpublishing.com or we may be contacted by mail at DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, P.O. Box 129, Woodstock IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including but not limited to the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved.

? MMIV by
JAMES DEVITA

Printed in the United States of America
All Rights Reserved
(A MID NIGHT CRY: The Underground Railroad to Freedom)

ISBN: 1-58342-248-X

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the Musical *must* give credit to the Author and Music Arrangers of the Musical in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Musical and in all instances in which the title of the Musical appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Musical and/or a production. The name of the Author and Music Arrangers *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. Biographical information on the Author, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

A MIDNIGHT CRY: The Underground Railroad to Freedom was originally produced by First Stage Children’s Theater, Milwaukee, Wis., on January 24, 2003, under the direction of Jeff Frank. Scenic designer, Sarah L. Hunt-Frank; costume designer, Pam Rehberg; lighting designer, Jason Fassel; music director and sound designer, Josh Schmidt; assistant music director, Sheri Williams Pannell; fight choreographer, Todd Denning; productions stage manager, Bradley E. Bingheim. The original cast was as follows:

Lida DAWN LYN MILLER
 Papa/Joshua/Ensemble MICHAEL A. TORREY
 Mama/Mrs. Williams/Hannah/Ensemble SHERI WILLIAMS
 PANNELL
 Uncle Eli/Ensemble JOSEPH HEMPHILL
 Jesup /Fitch/Ensemble TODD DENNING
 Halston/Rev. Nelson/Ensemble. MARK METCALF
 Bullard/Ensemble. AARON OREAR
 Keeley TRINITY ALEXANDRIA LITTLE
 Keeley. KEELEE ROGGENBUCK
 Musicians:
 Gui tar and Banjo JOHN NICHOLSON
 Percussion JAHMES “TONY” FINLAYSON

The originating theater shall receive billing credit in all future productions of the play and in all programs and publications of the play in book or in magazine form substantially as follows:

“Originally produced by First Stage Children’s Theater”

A MIDNIGHT CRY

The Underground Railroad to Freedom

A Full-length Play
For 5m and 3 w.

CHARACTERS

MAMA

PAPA

LIDA their daughter

KEELEY Lida's younger sister

ELI an uncle

BULLARD an overseer

JESUP an overseer

PHILLIP HALSTON the master

Characters to be played by the ensemble:

Mr. Nelson (a minister and conductor on the URR); Mrs. Williams (a church keeper); Joshua (former slave now free); Hannah (his wife); Mr. Fitch (an attorney, Freedom Fighter); various helpers on the URR.

CAST NOTE:

The cast of 8 is expandable to 17 speaking parts: 8m., 6w., 3 flexible. And as many ensemble as desired. Ensemble are used as singers, live musicians if so desired, and/or the various other helpers on the Underground Railroad. They are all a part of the play, not separate from the action. If an ensemble is not used, the actors fulfill this function.

DOUBLING POSSIBILITIES:

Papa/Joshua/Ensemble
Mama/Mrs. Williams/Hannah/Ensemble
Uncle Eli/Ensemble
Jesup/Mr. Fitch/Ensemble
Halston/Reverend Nelson/Ensemble
Bullard/Ensemble
Keeley/Ensemble
Lida

SET NOTE:

Flexible set, suggestive of location changes. The play was conceived as one of a passing down of oral history and it moves very fluidly from scene to scene. The set pieces are transformed into what is needed by the way the actors use them: a plank becomes a bridge; a crate pushed by another actor becomes a boat; wooden poles serve both as hoes for the slaves working the fields as well as paddles for the boat; crates and or boxes arranged atop each other can become the wagon headed north; a quilt thrown over a box becomes a bed. The way the crates, boxes and platforms are stacked together or arranged in different configurations in the course of the play create the location changes required.

VOCAL SELECTIONS

Up Above My Head Mama, Lida, Chorus
My Soul Wants Somethin' Lida, Mama, Papa, Eli
Steal Away Papa, Mama, Eli, Lida
Deep River Papa, Mama, Eli
Go Ahead Chorus
Oh, Freedom Hannah
Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel Chorus
Up Above My Head (finale) Lida, Chorus, All

A MIDNIGHT CRY

The Underground Railroad to Freedom

(Wooden crates, boxes strewn about the stage, planks of various sizes, one or two large wooden barrels. Quilts, sheets, clothes are hanging, strung, or draped across different areas—able to be manipulated by actors to create location, walls, props, etc. Other props/stage dressings are minimal. Actors positioned about the stage, dimly lit. Music #1: Opening (optional), Music #2: Midnight. Sound of branches rustling in the distance.)

MAMA. Hush! Quiet up, now! I say, hush!

PAPA. What is it, Mama?

MAMA. Dey here. Dey someone out dere. I hears it.

PAPA *(to upstage)*. Shh! *(Silence.)* You think i's him? He here?

MAMA. Dey someone out there.

PAPA. It ain't the hour dey telled Eli. *(Sound of branches rustling, closer now.)*

MAMA. There! I heared it again. Stay here 'n watch for the overseer.

PAPA. Make sure you ask where she livin', Mama.

MAMA *(venturing forth. The figure remains unseen or in shadow)*. Who be dere? Is that you, sir? I was told you be at dis place. Told you have something of my little

girl's. It's me, I'm her mama. Her papa right back dere—he be enfeebled, but he dere. I...we gots some money. It's all we able to—*(A package is tossed on the stage at MAMA's feet.)* Oh, Lord, sir, don't leave! No! No, please don't leave yet! Can you tell me something about my little girl. Tell me where she...? Sir? *(He is gone. Underscore out.)*

PAPA *(ELI helps him over)*. What the man say, Mama?

MAMA. He gone. He say nuthin'. He jus' gone. *(PAPA takes package. Looks around. Opens it.)* Didn't say no word 'bout her.

PAPA. Dere's nuthin' here, Mama. Jus' a book. Thi's it! Thi's it, Eli!? I thought you said he—

MAMA. Give it Eli, Papa. He got the words. Maybe dere somethin' to it.

ELI *(calling back to the other actors still in dim light)*. Youse keep an ear out. Watch the house. *(They huddle around. Careful. ELI opens it, flips through a few pages, trying to make out the words.)*

PAPA. What dey say, Eli?

MAMA. What's it got to do with Lida, Eli?

ELI. I don't know, it—wait, dere a note here with it. *(After reading.)* Lord a' mercy. I's from Lida. These her words. *(ELI flips through the book.)* They's all her words. Sister, this here book be hers. *(MAMA and PAPA gather around. As they do, the actor playing LIDA steps forward, off from the rest.)* They her words! Little Lida done wrote herself a book! *(ELI reads.)* She say...she say...dey a story fo' you, Mama—the words—and fo' you, Papa. They fo' all o' us. They fo' the rememberin'.

MAMA. Dey's my girl's words? She make all them letters ha'self?

ELI. I sees your name. And the mastah. And baby Keeley.
And me. Law, we *all* in it!

PAPA (*softly, in a whisper. Huddling around*). Read it. Do
the words, Eli.

ELI (*reading the cover*). “A...Mid...Midnight...Cry. A
Midnight Cry.” Tha’s the name o’ the book—the story...

“By...Lida Anderson—” (*Laughs.*) —I know her name.

Tha’s easy. First thing I teached her. I teached her that!

PAPA. My baby wrote a book?

ELI. It say it right here, it say...“By...”

LIDA. “By Lida Anderson...former slave.”

MAMA (*to herself*). She’s not a slave no more. She ain’t
no slave.

PAPA. I’s okay, Mama. I’s all good.

ELI. Here the story start now... “*Not...long...a-after...*”

*(LIDA speaks the first few words simultaneously with
ELI, then finishes the sentence herself. Music #3: “Up
Above My Head.”)*

LIDA. “*Not long after* the day I begins to live, I begins to
work...”

*(BULLARD whacks a stick. A bell rings, signaling work.
The actors now step into the story that LIDA has writ-
ten. Instrumental sound underscores.)*

BULLARD. Break it up! Break it up now!

JESUP. Back to work and be quick about it!

ALL OTHERS. Yes, sir. We doin’ that work, sir.

BULLARD & JESUP. You all better walk the chalk!

ALL. We walking that chalk, sir.

BULLARD. Don't let me catch you readin'.

ALL. We knows dat, sir.

JESUP. Or writin'.

ALL. None o' dat, sir.

BULLARD. No prayin'.

JESUP. No playin'!

KEELEY. I'ze walking that chalk, Master Sir!

BULLARD. I tell you when to work.

JESUP. When to eat.

BULLARD. When to sleep.

JESUP. When to think.

BULLARD. When to relieve yo'self.

JESUP. I tell you when to *breathe*.

BULLARD & JESUP. That is the chalk walkin' we're talking about!

ALL. Gettin' that money worth, Master Sir.

BULLARD. Anything I do not tell you to do, you are not allowed to do.

LIDA. We wasn't even allowed to remember. (*BULLARD strikes his stick.*)

ALL. But we all did. (*Bell.*)

MAMA (*singing*).

Up above my head,

LIDA. Can't no one stop a body from rememberin'.

PAPA. That they can't.

MAMA.

I hear music in the air.

LIDA. I keeps the memories.

ELI. Keepin' 'em, Miss Lida.

LIDA. Stores 'em away.

MAMA.

Up above my head

BULLARD. Move it, boy!

LIDA. I been witness to horrible sufferin' in my time.

MAMA.

I hear music in the air.

LIDA. Human bein's treated worse than cattle.

BULLARD. I said move your lazy hide!

MAMA.

Up above my head

LIDA. I 'member things past tellin', and got the words to match.

MAMA.

I hear music in the air.

LIDA. And I'm gonna use 'em.

MAMA.

And I really do believe

ALL. Lest we forget.

MAMA.

There's a heaven somewhere.

(Second verse: call and response as action of fieldwork begins.)

MAMA.

*Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
And I really do believe,
There's a heaven somewhere.*

(Underscore continues.)

CHORUS.

*Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
Up above my head,
I hear prayin' in the air
Up above my head
I hear prayin' in the air
And I really do believe
There's a heaven somewhere*

PAPA. We dere property.

MAMA. Same as a mule or dog.

LIDA. They say da's the way things *s'posed* to be.

ELI. The preachers tell us: "Servants, obey yo' masters."

KEELEY. Since the time we old enough to hear.

LIDA. We thought it was just a part o' livin'.

MAMA. They say it's in the Bible plain and clear.

ELI. Didn't know there was no other way to be.

PAPA. Jus' like a fish don't think o' climbin' trees—he don't even know there *is* trees.

ELI. But that was before things started to work up here.
(*Gestures to her head.*)

LIDA. And we begins to think.

PAPA. And to know.

MAMA. And to ask.

LIDA. And a new idea come a driftin' in.

ALL (*whispered loudly*). Freedom!

CHORUS.

Up above my head,

I see freedom in the air

Up above my head,

I see freedom in the air

Up above my head,

I see freedom in the air

And I really do believe,

There's a heaven somewhere.

LIDA.

Up above my head

I see freedom in the air

Up above my head,

I see freedom in the air

Up above my head,

I see freedom in the air

And I really do believe,

There's a heaven somewhere.

(Here, as throughout the play, the transitions from music/singing to spoken word are seamless and uninterrupted. There should never be the feeling of a musical number finishing and then a scene beginning. The sung words or music transition directly into the next scene,

sometimes fading under the first few words, or stopping abruptly, or overlapping.

Evening. ELI teaching LIDA.)

ELI. Straight line down...tha's right...den a big belly like the mastah got—no, the other way. Dere you go. Now wha's next? C'mon, child, you know. Make the sound.

LIDA (*sounding out her name*) Lida. Lid...uh.

ELI. What sound like *uh*? Go through yo' letters.

LIDA. A, B, C, D—

ELI. You passed it.

LIDA. I didn't say no *uh*.

ELI. The "A." The "A"s the uh.

LIDA. "A" sound like "A," it don't sound like *uh*.

ELI. We'll here it sound like uh.

LIDA. Well, why that?

ELI. I don't know, child, tha's jus' the way it be.

LIDA (*writing*). "A" sound like "A," *ah*, 'n *uh*. What kind o' sense that be?

ELI. Sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't; tha's the way things is. Try ag'in. "My name is Lida Anderson."

LIDA (*writes with difficulty*). How ever you learn all this, Uncle Eli?

ELI. The white chillun teach me. I takes 'em to da school ever'day. On the way dere 'n back, they shows me what they learnin'—the "m" got two humps, child...dere you go.

LIDA. A "e" go next here?

ELI. What you think, girl? Figger it out yo'self. Das how you learn. Das what they afraid of—you thinkin' fo' yo'self.

LIDA. Who afraid?

ELI. The mastah—ever’body. Afraid o’ us learnin’. ’Fraid we gonna get ideas in our heads. Tha’s why we got to teach ourselves. I teach you, den you teach another. Let me see, now. (*She gives him her work.*) “My name is Lida Anderson.” Every bitty letter dere right, Miss Lida. Look at that, makin’ yo’ own words! Why you a regular— (*The OVERSEERS pass by on patrol.*) —git down! We best get back, the sun’s comin’ up. Here, take this with you ’n work on yo’ readin’. Sound out the letters like I show you.

LIDA. Where’d you git a book?

ELI. Mastah’s lib’ary. He don’t read nuthin’ anyhow. You hide that book good when you done. (*LIDA engrossed in book.*) Lida, you hear me?

LIDA. Yes, sir. I will.

(*Music #4: Instrumental begins of “My Soul Wants Somethin’.”*)

LIDA (*shift*). I ’members the first time I read a word. So scared my fingers barely hold the book ’cause the mastah always be tellin’ us learnin’ jus’ ’bout the worst sin in the world. The first word, jus’ a tiny word, but the fear in me was a yellin’ that if I go ’n say it out loud the ground jus’ might open up ’n swallow me whole; or the lightnin’ goin’ to strike me down and dere be nuthin’ left o’ po’ little Lida Anderson but a itty-bitty spot o’ ash. But, I tell you, my mind run further away by saying that one word then my body ever did. (*Sounding out the word.*) “The.” (*Sounding out letters.*) T-H-E. “The.” Tha’s right. Tha’s all it was. Be better if it was a bit mo’

interestin' word. Like the first word I ever read was *freedom*, o' *faith*, o' *hope*. That make fo' some fine readin' maybe. But I didn't read those words. I read "the." But I read it. I read it ma'self. 'N the ground didn't swallow me up, 'n lightin' didn't stike, 'n those three little do-nuthin' letters had more hope, faith, 'n freedom in 'em than anythin' I ever known. They teach me that things jus' been kept *away* from me. And once a body learn that there's things that belong to *everyone*, but only some peoples have 'em and some don't—why, then the world ain't never be the same fo' you. Freedom like that. Freedom a thing some peoples have and some don't, but it belong to everyone. It like the air. Ain't nobody own the air. A thing can't be mo' wrong than that.

(KEELEY enters. Music #5: Keeley Underscore #1. She sneaks up on LIDA.)

LIDA. And I seen all that in that one little word I read, that nuthin' of a word that no one even notice no more; it jus' there to serve up the other words. Jus' there to work. Jus' like me. *(KEELEY snatches the book out of LIDA's hands, playing keep away. LIDA chases her. KEELEY not realizing the danger.)* Keeley, give me that back!

KEELEY. What you gonna do with it?

LIDA. Keeley, this ain't no game—give it here! *(Misses her.)*

KEELEY. Why? You ain't got the words, what you gonna do with a book?

LIDA. I do got the words—some of 'em.

KEELEY. Show me.