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Dramatic Publishing

OH FREEDOM!

THE STORY OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

A Play with
music by
Peter Manos



OH FREEDOM!

THE STORY OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Play with music. By Peter Manos. Cast: 2 to 10m., 2 to 10w., up to 10 either gender. The greatest collaboration against racism in American history before the Civil Rights Movement was the Underground Railroad, in which persons of all ethnic backgrounds from North and South came together to help escaped slaves make their way to free territory. *Oh Freedom! The Story of the Underground Railroad* celebrates this collaboration combining the stories of the men and women who were active in the fight against slavery with songs of the period. Harriet Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe are here, as well as lesser known heroes of the movement. *Oh Freedom!* can be performed with as few as four singing actors or can be expanded to include a large cast and choir. It is ideal for schools and for touring. *Bare stage. There are no mandatory set requirements. Approximate running time: 45 minutes. Code: OA4.*

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Oh Freedom! The Story of the Underground Railroad

By

PETER MANOS



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Oh Freedom: The Story of the Underground Railroad was premiered by The WordPlayers in Knoxville, Tenn., and toured eastern Tennessee from Feb. 1 to March 4, 2016.

Cast:

Player #1Marlena Allison
Player #2Ethan Norman
Player #3Jeni Lamm
Player #4Malik Baines

Production Staff:

Artistic DirectorTerry Webber
Managing DirectorJeni Lamm
DirectorTracey Copeland Halter
Stage ManagerArtece Slay

Oh Freedom! The Story of the Underground Railroad

CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

NARRATOR #1-4

HARRIET TUBMAN

JOHN RANKIN

WILLIAM STILL

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

OLUDAH EQUIANO [*oh-LOO-dah ek-wee-AH-no*]

SLAVE WOMAN

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON

JONATHAN WALKER

PEG LEG JOE

SAMUEL SMITH

HENRY “BOX” BROWN

WHITE FEMALE PASSENGER

CREWMAN

DRIVER

PORTER

RAILWAY CLERK

PRODUCTION NOTES

Oh Freedom can be performed without a set. Action must be fluid. It can also be performed with as few as 4 singing actors (2m., 2w.), doubling suggestions below. In order to accentuate the equal collaboration of the Underground Railroad between whites and blacks, it is requested that equal numbers of each are used.

PLAYER #1 (black woman):

NARRATOR #1
HARRIET TUBMAN
SLAVE WOMAN
CREWMAN
DRIVER
RAILWAY CLERK

PLAYER #3 (white woman):

NARRATOR #3
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE
WHITE FEMALE PASSENGER
PORTER

PLAYER #2 (white man):

NARRATOR #2
JOHN RANKIN
WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON
JONATHAN WALKER
“PEG LEG”JOE
SAMUEL SMITH

PLAYER #4 (black man):

NARRATOR #4
WILLIAM STILL
OLUDAH EQUIANO
HENRY “BOX” BROWN

SONGS

1. Follow the Drinking Gourd
2. Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child
3. Deep River
4. Battle Hymn of the Republic
5. Wade in the Water
6. Let My People Go
7. Steal Away
8. Oh Freedom
9. I Waited Patiently for the Lord

These songs and a study guide can be found in the back of the book.

Oh Freedom: The Story of the Underground Railroad

ALL. The Underground Railroad!

NARRATOR #1. It wasn't underground.

NARRATOR #2. It wasn't a railroad.

NARRATOR #3. But between 1800 and 1865 Americans worked together, to help slaves from the South escape to freedom in the North.

NARRATOR #4. It got its name when an escaped slave made it across the Ohio River and the slave catchers followed him there but couldn't find him.

NARRATOR #2. "He must have gone underground," said one. And the name stuck.

NARRATOR #3. Networks and smugglers and secret codes and songs and safe houses—it wasn't a railroad, but it did the job of one, transporting "passengers" out of bondage to freedom—

ALL. Freedom!

NARRATOR #4. And they mostly didn't use maps—

NARRATOR #1. Slaves were not allowed to be taught to read. It was against the law.

NARRATOR #2. And they mostly didn't have guides—

NARRATOR #3. If you are caught helping a slave, all your property could be taken away or you yourself might be strung up on a tree and hanged.

NARRATOR #1. What they mostly had was the stars in the sky, and most important, the North Star. And you found that North Star following the star right at the end of the bowl of a group of stars called the Big Dipper, right where it pointed—

NARRATOR #2. A big drinking gourd in the sky—

NARRATOR #3. Run your finger from the lip of that dipper
and see where it's pointing. North Star. Northward.

NARRATOR #4. Look up, and then run. Run for your life,
'cause they're after you, but you run—North, away from
slavery, away from chains and whips and toward free-
dom—Follow the Big Dipper. Follow—

ALL. The drinking gourd!

(#1: “Follow the Drinking Gourd”)

ALL.

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
FOR THE OLD MAN IS WAITING TO CARRY YOU TO
FREEDOM

TUBMAN. And you follow it to meet me and I'll get you
through. Harriet Tubman.

ALL.

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD.
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
FOR THE OLD MAN IS WAITING TO CARRY YOU TO
FREEDOM
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

JOHN RANKIN. And you follow it to the light in my win-
dow. That's my safe house. John Rankin.

ALL.

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD.
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
 FOR THE OLD MAN IS WAITING TO CARRY YOU TO
 FREEDOM
 FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

WILLIAM STILL. And you follow it to a town where my network of people will make you disappear. William Still.

ALL.

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
 FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
 FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD
 FOR THE OLD MAN IS WAITING TO CARRY YOU TO
 FREEDOM
 FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE. And you follow it to the many people, young and old, white and black, male and female, coming together to do what's right in a world gone crazy from that great American tragedy—slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe. But let's talk about slavery—

ALL. Slavery!

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE. Let's talk about how it came that some people owned other people. Let's talk about the invention of black and white.

ALL. Black and white!

(#2: “Motherless Child”)

ALL (*cont'd*).

SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
 SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
 SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD
 A LONG WAY FROM HOME.

SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD
A LONG WAY FROM HOME.

(All raise their arms to show them all shackled together by a paper chain.)

NARRATOR #1. Slavery didn't start in America just for Africans.

NARRATOR #2. Slavery started in America for anybody who was poor.

NARRATOR #3. Slavery started in America for anybody with nothing to lose—but themselves and their freedom.

NARRATOR #1. But slavery stayed in America until we all were the losers.

NARRATOR #2. Slavery started in America using people forced here from all over.

NARRATOR #1. Slavery started with indentured servants—farmers from Europe whose crops had failed brought to America to work the land without pay, sometimes for 20 years or more, until they earned their freedom.

NARRATOR #2. Slavery started with convicts shipped to America, sometimes for something as trivial as stealing a loaf of bread. America was their prison.

NARRATOR #3. Slavery started with sailors without ships, laborers without jobs, Europeans, Africans, Indians whose tribes had been wiped out by disease. They weren't white or black, they were just—

ALL. Unlucky.

SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD.
SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD
A LONG WAY FROM HOME.

NARRATOR #1. As time went on, the indentured servants worked their way to freedom, or ran away, or joined the Indians, or died.

NARRATOR #2. The landowners tried to keep them in bondage longer—with stricter laws, harsher punishments, bigger rewards—

NARRATOR #4. But there were never enough people to work the land, to tend the tobacco, the rice, the sugar cane—the cotton—terrible back-breaking work that nobody wanted to do, that you could not pay people to do because the land was huge and the workers were few.

NARRATOR #3. So, in Virginia first, then elsewhere, North and South, to keep people working, to keep things peaceful, because the poor resented the rich, governors and landowners hit on an idea—

NARRATOR #1. If you were European, which is to say “white”—you could work or buy your way out of bondage to freedom.

NARRATOR #2. If you were African or Indian or anything NOT white, you were a slave. Forever.

NARRATOR #3. The color of your face showed who was free and who was not.

NARRATOR #4. The color of your face showed who was “better” and who was “worse”—

NARRATOR #2. Who had rights, who had not.

NARRATOR #4. Who was a “man” and who was a—

ALL. Boy!

NARRATOR #1. But still, people ran away, further west, because they could. Indians fought back and often won. They played the colonists off each other—French, English, Dutch, Spanish. Black men and white men sometimes joined together to fight for their rights.

NARRATOR #2. People were needed who were easy to control, who did not know where they were, who could not get away and who could not organize against their masters.

And so began the kidnapping of people from—

ALL. Africa! (*To tune of “Motherless Child.”*)

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

A LONG LONG WAY FROM HOME

(*Continue to hum the tune under OLUDAH EQUIANO.*)

EQUIANO. They seized us from our village. No time to cry out, or make resistance. They stopped our mouths, and they tied our hands ... I was carried on board the slave ship and was tossed up and down to see if I were sound by some of the crew; then I was put down under the decks, such a stench! People packed tight, chained crying together. I became sick. They tied my feet, and flogged me severely.

ALL (*to the tune of “Motherless Child”*).

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

EQUIANO. The closeness of the place, the heat, the number in the ship, so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us.

ALL (*to the tune of "Motherless Child"*).

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

EQUIANO. The air soon unfit to breathe from the smell of sickness. Many died ... aggravated by the galling of the chains, children, men, women all together, and the filth, suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying ... some severely cut for attempting to jump overboard to their deaths and hourly whipped for not eating ... Many many weeks later through storm and death, we landed in this new country far from our homes. They corralled us together, naked—men, women and children. We were examined like horses or pigs—fingers in mouths and noses—slaps and punches to test our fitness—and then they sold us, separated us—brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers and their children, babies, all separated, never to see each other again, always to work in chains until they died—Oludah Equiano, 1789.

ALL (*to the tune of "Motherless Child"*).

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

MTOTO YATIMA (*ma-TOW-tow ya-TEE-ma*)

SOMETIMES

I FEEL

LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD

YATIMA (*ya-TEE-ma*)

MFIWA (*ma-FEE-wa*)

LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD

WASIO NA MAKAZI (*WA-ZEE-OH NAH MA-KAH-ZEE*)

A LONG WAY FROM HOME ...

NARRATOR #1. Yes, many felt slavery was wrong.

NARRATOR #2. “All men are created equal,” wrote Thomas Jefferson.

NARRATOR #3. “Loosen the bounds of slavery and promote a general enjoyment of the blessings of freedom,” wrote Benjamin Franklin.

NARRATOR #2. “I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of slavery,” said George Washington.

NARRATOR #1. I say—many felt slavery was wrong, many wanted to end slavery, many wanted to but—

ALL. Nobody did!

NARRATOR #1. Nobody did. They can’t pay people enough to farm sugar cane in punishing heat working night and day with little rest—cutting, crushing, squeezing the juice, boiling. Some people dropped dead from exhaustion and from the heat, or disease. Some had arms crushed in the juice squeezers. Some fell in the vats and were boiled along with the syrup.

NARRATOR #2. They can’t pay people enough to tend tobacco plants ’round the clock to harvest the leaves, dry them, cure them, turn them this way, turn them that, keep out water, keep out vermin, poison tobacco juice on the hands, up the nose, in the eyes—OUCH!

NARRATOR #3. They can’t pay people enough to tend the rice in the bug infested swamps with the leeches stuck to your legs and the mosquitoes biting at your eyes and ears, the sun beating down or the rain and mist chilling your bones.

NARRATOR #2. And finally, after Eli Whitney’s cotton gin made it easy to extract the seeds from the filament of the cotton plant, they could not pay people enough to pick that cotton with its needle thorns pricking your fingers and turning your hands red and throbbing under the sun and under the whip if you faltered just a moment.

(The others humming “Motherless Child” quietly underneath.)

TUBMAN. Nope. They gotta put a gun to your head and chains on your legs or around your neck. And say—Pick this cotton—or I’ll kill you.

ALL. Work—or die! Work—or die!

NARRATOR #2. And if you try to run off, they go after you with dogs and they catch you and string you up or upside down or cut off an ear or put a red-hot brand to your cheek or flat out just shoot you dead as a warning to others.

NARRATOR #3. Or they sell you down South where the heat and disease will kill you and sell away your wives and your children so you never see them again—

SLAVE WOMAN. Not my baby! Not my baby please! Let me keep my baby! Please!

NARRATOR #1. And the whipping and the working and the working and the whipping—As one slave called it—nightmare—all day, all night.

ALL. Nightmare all day and all night!

(A crack of the whip, all bow their heads.)

(#3: “Deep River”)

ALL.

DEEP RIVER

MY HOME IS OVER JORDAN

DEEP RIVER, LORD,

I WANT TO CROSS OVER INTO CAMP GROUND

DEEP RIVER

MY HOME IS OVER JORDAN

DEEP RIVER, LORD

I WANT TO CROSS OVER INTO CAMP GROUND.

NARRATOR #1. Slavery was the law of the land. Slavery was even in the United States Constitution—

NARRATOR #2. Article 4, section 2, clause 3—

NARRATOR #1. “No person held to service or labour in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labour, but shall be delivered upon claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due.”

ALL. Translation—

NARRATOR #1. Escaped slaves must be captured and brought back no matter where they go in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

ALL.

I WANT TO CROSS OVER INTO CAMP GROUND.

NARRATOR #1. Of the first five presidents, four owned slaves.

ALL. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe—

NARRATOR #2. Of the seven presidents after that, six owned slaves.

ALL. Jackson, Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Polk, Taylor—

NARRATOR #4. North and South, slavery was embedded in the fabric of America. It was bigger business than banking, textiles, cattle, corn, wheat, every other industry put together.

NARRATOR #2. The only reason it didn't continue in the North is you don't need workers year-round to tend a wheat field or a corn field. You plant it in summer, wait four months, and pick it. Hire workers in May, hire 'em again in October. A wheat farmer doesn't need a slave, but if he could grow cotton, maybe he would.

ALL. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe—