Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad:

A Drama Workshop for Junior High and High School Students

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Writing in the December 21, 1963 issue of Saturday Review, James Baldwin urged the importance of African American history for *all* Americans: "If . . . one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you'd be liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history." Since the time of Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers," educators across America have given more attention to the cultural contributions of people of African descent. Drama in the classroom offers teachers a unique opportunity to "bring to life" the challenges and triumphs of African Americans in a way that is not only intellectually enriching but experiential as well. It is the drama teacher's task, in the words of O'Neill and Lambert (1991), "to engage the class in an exploration that goes deeper and which increases their understanding of the thoughts and feelings of people in such situations" (p. 33). In this article we review a drama workshop conducted with young adolescents in Jersey City that brought to life the heroic story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad in a way both meaningful and engaging to the participating students.

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The Educational Arts Team, a Jersey City, New Jersey based arts-in-education program, sets out to transform stories from the literature books used in local public schools into drama, art and writing. In the past, we have worked with everything from world mythology and fairytales to current events on the evening news. The Team employs the arts, along with learning games and classroom discussions, as vehicles to involve students deeply and emotionally in those stories and events; we encourage students to stand up for what is right and to change their world for the better. The story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad allows adolescents to explore the emotional and physical difficulties slaves endured while escaping North along the perilous paths of the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad refers to the various escape routes that led African Americans from slavery in the South to freedom in the North and into Canada. Active as early as the 1790s, the Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad but an informal and improvised network of pathways and safe houses for fugitive slaves. The escaping slaves were called passengers; the people who sheltered them, station agents; and those who guided them, conductors. Harriet Tubman is perhaps the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. Her firm belief in freedom and justice prompted her to willingly put herself in danger time and again. The goal of the workshop is to expose the students not only to the wealth of literature that exists about Harriet Tubman but also to the peculiar conditions of slavery and resistance in America during her lifetime. Passages from Ann Petry's *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1995) are used because they bring into question issues of trust, perseverance, and commitment, and evoke a journey of discovery and heroism.

Since the Underground Railroad marks the first time in American history that blacks and whites collaborated successfully upon a project of great social significance, many historians have come to think of this moment as constituting the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement (Chadwick, 1999). It is hoped, therefore, that the workshop will also help students to understand the importance of cross-cultural cooperation in the wider historical context of resistance, collaboration and social justice.

We have broken down the workshop into a series of eight parts. This outline, of course, is not intended to be an exact blueprint of the workshop. A teacher

should feel free to add, delete, and modify parts, as well as to follow other activities and ideas suggested by students or by the workshop process itself. A drama workshop, like

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a jazz performance, is best when there is strong sense that each workshop is a unique process. Yet a chart or an outline gives direction and sets parameters. Spontaneity, imagination, and improvisation are key.

Because of the particular needs of children in Jersey City, we deliberately emphasized reading and writing as key components of the process. A central ingredient in the workshop, as outlined below, is the personal journal. During the course of the workshop each student is asked to make entries, not as him or herself, but as persona in role. Relating their feelings, thoughts and reactions to slavery as the classroom dramatization unfolds, the students are asked to write as if the perilous escape to freedom were their own. Teachers may wish to include more art, music, map making, or other activities that seem relevant and germane to their own class's interests, needs, and abilities.

The Workshop

1. Introduction

To begin the workshop the leader explains to the students that they will be hearing passages from a story about Harriet Tubman and that they will be asked to enact some dramatic moments from the story. The students are also informed that they will be asked to write down some of their personal reactions as if they were a group of slaves escaping from a plantation in Maryland.

The leader then asks the class to jot down what they know about Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad and the history of slavery in the United States. This helps the leader gauge how knowledgeable the class is about this topic and begins to tap into the emotional energy, often repressed or understated, that is connected to this chapter in American history. Responses have ranged from mistaking Harriet Tubman for Rosa Parks to believing that she was the owner of an actual railroad. Sadly, few students identified her as an African American slave who freed herself and became a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, helping hundreds of other slaves to escape to freedom.

2. Trapped: Born into Slavery

The leader brainstorms with the class what life might have been like for young people born into slavery in the United States of America around the early part of the nineteenth century. How do you think young slaves were treated and what were some of the forces that kept them from escaping? After discussion the leader forms the class into a circle and places a volunteer in the middle, blindfolded. The person in the center tries to "escape" by leaving the circle but upon touching someone in the circle they hear one of the reasons why they cannot escape. They must then return to the middle of the circle and try to leave by some other way. This activity creates a sensory experience that can become a metaphor for feeling trapped and hopeless. At the conclusion of the game, the class continues the writing process by entering in their journals how it might have felt to be trapped in a social institution like slavery.

3. The Rumors of Escape

The leader then reads to the class the following passage from Petry's story:

> ***Along the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the masters kept hearing whispers about the man named Moses, who was running off slaves. Now and then they heard whispered rumors that he was in the neighborhood.***

To communicate the clandestine nature of the rumors that were circulating among the slaves, the leader conducts a listening game. The Telephone Line involves students in an activity that suggests the stealth and danger of the task they are about to undertake. The teacher whispers into the ear of one person, Moses has come. The phrase is then passed from person to person, until the words return. The leader then asks the group what would a slave be thinking when they know Moses is in the area? The class records in their journals what might be going on in the mind of a slave who has heard that Moses is coming.

Next the leader reads aloud:

Once she had made her presence known sometimes by

singing the forbidden spiritual Go down, Moses, way down to Egypt Land–word of her coming had spread from cabin to cabin. The slaves whispered to each other, ear to mouth, mouth to ear, "Moses is here." "Moses has come." "Get ready." "Moses is back again."

If you were one of those slaves, would you leave or would you stay? What would be your fears about leaving? When would be the best time to escape: during the night or during the day; summer or winter? What routes and roads should be taken? Students write their thoughts down and share them with a partner and then with the class.

4. Planning the Escape

The teacher continues to read aloud from the text:

In December 1851, when she started out with a band of fugitives that she planned to take to Canada, Harriet Tubman had been in the vicinity of the plantation for days, planning the trip, carefully selecting the slaves that she would take with her.

The leader asks the group what qualities a person would need to go North with Harriet Tubman, traveling at night in the dead of winter. In pairs, they decide which one of them will be Harriet Tubman and which one will be the slave. A slave has come to Harriet Tubman seeking to go North and Ms. Tubman is questioning his/her ability to make the long and dangerous journey. When the pairs finish, the leader asks the group what it was like to be in role as one of the characters. Students then write in their journals how they will prepare for their escape.

5. The Escape

The teacher then reads the following passage:

There were eleven in this party. She had to take them all the way to Canada. But there were so many of them this time. She knew moments of doubt when she was half-afraid, and kept looking back over her shoulder, imagining she heard the sound of pursuit. They would certainly be pursued. Eleven of them.

The teacher asks the students to stand one behind the other until the line is twelve to fifteen people long. Each one of the students places her/his hands upon the shoulders of the person in front of them. The last person in the line closes his or her eyes and walks along, touching the arms of the people in the line until he or she reaches the front of the line. As each student takes a turn, the teacher reads:

They walked at night. Their progress was slow. It took them three nights of walking to reach the first stop.

The leader asks the groups to share what thoughts are going on in the minds of the escaping slaves and what kinds of sounds they might have heard while walking at night. The group whispers some of these sounds and fears to the person who is walking blindly down the line. When everyone has had a turn, the leader asks the group to write down their reactions as the characters from the story.

6. The First Stop

At last, the escaping slaves arrive safely at the first stop on their journey to freedom. The students are asked to write down their observations and reflections of the place to which they have arrived and perhaps even to draw a picture of it. Who is there? What does the house look like? Where do the slaves sleep? What are they eating? How were they greeted?

After they have completed their journal entries, the students share their descriptions with a partner. In small groups, the young people tell about or act out one of the scenes described in their journals.

7. The Worm of Doubt

But the road to freedom is filled with danger, indecision and doubt. Perhaps it would have been better to remain behind. The worm of doubt begins to crawl within their stomachs. The teacher reads aloud:

Two nights later she was aware that the feet behind her were moving slower and slower. She heard the irritability in their voices, she knew that soon someone would refuse to go on. One of them suddenly cried out in despair, "Let me go back. It is better to be a slave than to suffer like this in order to be free."

The teacher asks for volunteers to create a tableau in front of the class illustrating this moment from the story. The students work to capture the characters, emotions and feelings at this point in the escape attempt. The class comments upon the tableau and adjust it to better represent the moment. When the class is satisfied with the tableau, the teacher repeats the reading. The teacher continues reading from the story while the characters are

frozen in place. Finally, the teacher asks them to respond by slowly creating action during the following reading:

> ***She carried a gun with her on these trips. She had never used it– except as a threat. She lifted the gun, aimed it at the despairing slave. She said, "Go on with us or die." He hesitated for a moment, and then he joined the others. They started walking again.***

The group records their reactions to this moment in their journals.

8. Interviewing a Former Slave

> ***By slow stages they reached Philadelphia, where William Still recorded their names, and the plantation whence they had come, and something of the life they had led in slavery. In 1872 he published this record in book form and called it The Underground Railroad.***

In pairs the students become William Still (the son of a freed slave living in Philadelphia who helped runaway slaves) and one of the slaves stopping at his house on the way to Canada. William Still records the name of the plantation from which the slave has come, something of the slave's life, and what the journey North has been like. When the interviews are completed, the partners can share their writings with each other. Then the pairs edit each other's writing and the class can assemble all of the writings into a replica of William Still's book *The Underground Railroad*. This compilation can be decorated, illustrated and shared as a tangible symbol of the class's collaboration on the project.

Discussion

The story of the Underground Railroad is one of the most heroic episodes in American history. It highlights both the depravity and viciousness of slavery while at the same time revealing the courage, idealism, and selflessness that Americans have been able to muster in the face of injustice and oppression. By bringing this story to life through classroom participatory drama, young people have the opportunity to awaken to their own stirrings of social consciousness. In-class dramas, such as this one, aim to help students achieve a meaningful and formative experience while in role; students are not presenting a performance for there is no script, no stage, no audience, no applause and no bows. We have noted that children so engaged become more enthusiastic and passionate in their academic work as well as more mindful and respectful in their interactions with their classmates. The inclusion of reading and writing activities throughout the process both reinforces the unfolding drama and assists students in developing the skills necessary to participate more fully as citizens of the world. It is no doubt challenging for a teacher to develop the flexibility and improvisational skills required for successful classroom drama; but the rewards, in terms of academic achievement, group cooperation and personal satisfaction, far outweigh the demands.

For those teachers who may wish to develop the workshop more literally as a history lesson, we would recommend a review of the historical source material we have included in our bibliography. African-American statesmen, social activists, and scholars of all colors have written eloquently on the subject and can provide the reader with many insights into that tragic chapter in American history. Perhaps of most interest is the body of work compiled by former slaves themselves who narrate their personal experiences of bondage in the days before the Civil War. These oral histories help to sensitize those of us who have never experienced the indignities of slavery and racism to understand more clearly the actual nature of human bondage.

Although the 19th century struggle against slavery is the obvious focal point of this workshop, its intentions are actually much broader and more universal. The sensitive teacher will understand the workshop not only as a literal dramatization of slavery and escape but as a metaphor for all who are willing to challenge oppression in its multiplicity of forms and to take on the responsibility demanded of the struggle for liberation. From this wider perspective, the courage and resourcefulness of Harriet Tubman transcend both ethnicity and a particular point in history and become, instead, an archetypal embodiment of the mythological hero who risks all in service to a higher and more noble ideal. The call to freedom may be an inner voice as much as an outer one. The darkness of the night may reflect not only the literal absence of light that slaves encountered as they stole away to freedom but also the fear and doubt we all experience as we explore the less traveled paths of life. The escape to the

North may be as much about a transformed state of mind as it is about a geographical destination. The workshop as a reflection of this journey becomes the opportunity for young people and their teachers to travel not only back into history but also down the pathways of the heart.✷

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