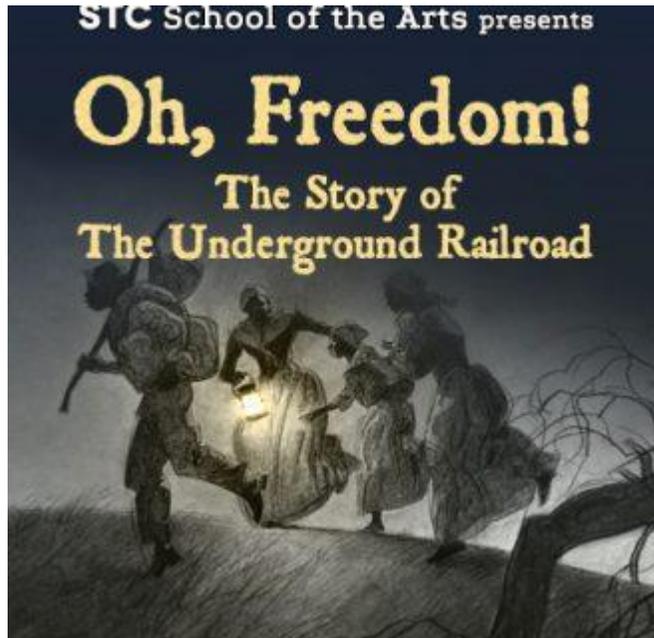


# Sacramento Theatre Company

## Study Guide



## **Oh, Freedom!** **The Story of the Underground Railroad**

By Peter Manos

Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles

# **Sacramento Theatre Company**

## **Mission Statement**

The Sacramento Theatre Company (STC) strives to be the leader in integrating professional theatre with theatre arts education. STC produces engaging professional theatre, provides exceptional theatre training, and uses theatre as a tool for educational engagement.

## **Our History**

The theatre was originally formed as the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre in 1942, an ad hoc troupe formed to entertain locally-stationed troops during World War II. On October 18, 1949, the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre acquired a space of its own with the opening of the Eaglet Theatre, named in honor of the Eagle, a Gold Rush-era theatre built largely of canvas that had stood on the city's riverfront in the 1850s. The Eaglet Theatre eventually became the Main Stage of the not-for-profit Sacramento Theatre Company, which evolved from a community theatre to professional theatre company in the 1980s. Now producing shows in three performance spaces, it is the oldest theatre company in Sacramento.

After five decades of use, the Main Stage was renovated as part of the H Street Theatre Complex Project. Features now include an expanded and modernized lobby and a Cabaret Stage for special performances. The facility also added expanded dressing rooms, laundry capabilities, and other equipment allowing the transformation of these performance spaces, used nine months of the year by STC, into backstage and administration places for three months each summer to be used by California Musical Theatre for Music Circus.

Sacramento Theatre Company can accommodate 292 patrons in the proscenium-style auditorium of its Main Stage, while the Pollock Stage offers a more intimate experience with only 87 seats in a black box-style theatre. Both provide good acoustics and sight-lines. This professional, Equity theatre presents seven professional productions per season with a reputation for excellent stage adaptations of classic literature. Three annual productions in the Cabaret Stage, which seats 100, round out the experience with high-quality Broadway musical revues.

The Young Professionals Conservatory, a training program for young theatre artists, was founded in 2003. The program, as well as the entire STC School of the Arts, is directed by Michele Hillen-Noufer.

**For further information about the Sacramento Theatre Company please visit us online:**

**<http://www.sactheatre.org>**

# Oh, Freedom!

## Sacramento Theatre Company Production Study Guide

Study Guide Materials Published with Permission from The Dramatic Publishing Company

### Contents:

#### Information on the Play

About the Writer	4
Synopsis	5
Characters	6
Glossary of Terms	7

#### Scholarly Articles on the Play

Not Underground, Not a Railroad: Important Historical Figures	9
About Slavery in America	11

#### Interactive Materials

Activity: "What Would You Do?"	12
Study Guide Questions: Engage with the Play	13
Theatre Etiquette	15
Additional Resources	16

Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles

## About the Writer: *Oh, Freedom!*

### **Peter Manos**

Peter Manos holds a doctorate in American history and is a professional playwright, director and actor who has worked extensively in New York and regionally and now resides and works in northeastern Ohio. He teaches American History at Cleveland State University and speech and theatre at John Carroll University and at Cuyahoga Community College. Manos is artistic director of Bodwin Theatre Company in Cleveland, specializing in classical theatre from Shakespeare to Sartre. His plays have been performed both Off-Broadway and regionally. His adaptation of Anthony Hope's swash-buckler *The Prisoner of Zenda* premiered at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse. His comedy set in the Middle Ages, *Golden*, was recognized for excellence at the Centre Stage New Play Festival. *Oh Freedom! The Story of the Underground Railroad* is not Manos' first play about the Underground Railroad; his drama *3,000 Miles Underground* was performed at Cleveland Public Theatre's Station Hope festival in 2014, and *3,000 Miles Underground, Part II* had its premiere at the same festival in 2015. His acclaimed play with music about the Civil Rights movement, *Walk, Don't Ride! A Celebration of the Fight for Equality* has been performed frequently by professional, amateur and school groups through the US and is published by Dramatic Publishing. As a historian, he has published a book about the memoirs of an ordinary soldier in the American Revolution, *Joseph Plumb Martin and the American Imagination*.

## **Synopsis: *Oh, Freedom!***

The ensemble enters the stage, and begins to tell the story of the Underground Railroad- which was neither underground, nor a railroad, but rather an elaborate network of Americans working together to help slaves in the South runaway to freedom in the North. Together, the ensemble locates the North Star, and begin to sing a song of the Underground Railroad: "Follow the Dipping Gourd," which refers to the Big Dipper constellation in the night sky, which would guide runaway slaves as they made their way to freedom. The narrators tell the story of the beginning of slavery, when men and women were kidnapped from their homes in Africa and taken across the world on cruel and harsh slave ships. From the, we learn that most of the early American presidents had slaves, and that while many didn't exactly agree with slavery, very few actually did anything to stop it.

Gradually, the ensemble narrators become various historical figures important to the history of the Underground Railroad: first, an African man named Oludah Equiado, who shares his experience as a captive aboard a slave ship. Next, William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe express their hatred for slavery by sharing writings from *The Liberator* newspaper and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, respectively. We meet Jonathan Walker, who was punished for smuggling slaves out of the country, and we learn the legend of Peg Leg Joe, a one-legged sailor who visits slaves working in the fields and whispers the path to freedom in their ears- he leads the slaves to John Rankin's house across the Ohio River, where he always keeps a light on for the slaves to see and follow in the darkness.

A slave woman crosses the harsh Ohio River with her infant child to prevent her master from separating them- against all odds, she makes it to Rankin's home, and her story is immortalized as the most famous escape story ever in Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As we continue learning about the Underground Railroad, we meet Harriet Tubman, a fierce conductor of the railroad, and escaped slave herself, who will keep her charges safe by any means necessary, even if those means seem harsh. She is one of many we meet who are willing to put themselves in great danger to reach freedom- another such character is Henry "Box" Brown, who's story we hear next: Henry Brown convinces a sympathetic white merchant to ship Henry in a box to the north. Henry endures weeks of harsh travel trapped in the tiny box, but makes it to the North and later travels around the country with his box, telling his story.

At the end of the play, the ensemble celebrates freedom together, with a song, "Oh, Freedom."

## **Characters: *Oh, Freedom!***

**Narrators:** The ensemble of the show, who explain the history of the Underground Railroad and tell the story of the play in between becoming the historical figures and characters featured in the play's action

**Harriet Tubman:** An escaped slave who became a prominent leader and guide, or "conductor," in the Underground Railroad

**John Rankin:** a white conductor of the Underground Railroad, who ran a safe house for escaped slaves

**William Still:** an African-American conductor of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Harriet Beecher Stowe:** an abolitionist writer, best known for her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a depiction of the harsh conditions of American slavery

**Oludah Equiano:** known also as Gustavus Vassa, a former slave and abolitionist in the British movement to end the Atlantic slave trade

**Slave Woman:** a slave woman of unknown name, but whose story became famous after she escaped from her master in order to save her baby from a life of slavery

**William Lloyd Garrison:** a white abolitionist responsible for founding the influential abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* and founding the American Anti-Slavery Society

**Jonathan Walker:** aka "The Man With the Branded Hand," who was branded with "SS" on his hand, for "slave stealer," after being caught smuggling escaped slaves onto a boat in Florida

**Peg Leg Joe:** a legend, supposedly the "old man" mentioned in the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," an ex-sailor with a wooden leg who would whisper to slaves in the field about the Underground Railroad

**Samuel Smith:** a Virginia merchant sensitive to the plight of slaves, who helped Henry "Box" Brown ship himself to freedom in the north

**Henry "Box" Brown:** a slave who, desperate for freedom, convinced Samuel Smith to mail him in a large box all the way to the North

**White Female Passenger:** an entitled woman who sits on Henry's box, not knowing there is a human being within

**Crewman:** a crew member of the boat Henry and his box travel on

**Driver:** a wagon driver, who transports Henry's box to the train station

**Porter and Railway Clerk:** employees at the train station

# *Oh, Freedom! The Story of the Underground Railroad*

## Glossary of Terms

**The following definitions are for words and terms used in the play that may be new or confusing.**

- 1.) **"Boy"**- When characters in the play refer to themselves as "boy" or "a boy", they refer to a derogatory term slave owners and other white people used to address black male slaves
- 2.) **Colonists**- Europeans who came to America in search of a "new world," and who took control of the land from the natives
- 3.) **Slave ship**- The ships used to transport African slaves to America
- 4.) **Flogged**- to be beaten or whipped with a stick as punishment
- 5.) **Sugarcane**- the plant from which sugar is made
- 6.) **Juice Squeezers**- machines used to squeeze the juice out of the sugarcane plant, which would then be used to make sugar; often manned by slaves in boiling houses connected to the sugar plantations
- 7.) **The Cotton Gin**- a machine which separates cotton fibers from their seeds, invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, and which made the production and harvesting of cotton much easier and quicker
- 8.) **"red-hot brand"**- a "brand" is used as a way to mark cattle; a "branding iron," or a long piece of metal, is heated up and then used to burn an image into the skin
- 9.) **Abolition**- the act of abolishing or dismantling a system; in this case, slavery
- 10.) **The Liberator**- a religious American newspaper founded by William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp, with the specific purpose of convincing the American public that slavery should be immediately abolished
- 11.) **Uncle Tom's Cabin**- a landmark novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and published in 1852; the book was an important tool leading to the freeing of the slaves by portraying the reality of slavery while also helping the white population to empathize with black slaves, but the book is also the source of many American stereotypes about black slaves, including the kindly "mammy" character and the "Uncle Tom" character, who is dutiful and committed to his white masters
- 12.) **The Quakers/Society of Friends**- The Quakers, or "The Religious Society of Friends," is a Christian movement committed to the values of peace; founded in 1650, the Quakers were instrumental in running the Underground Railroad and in promoting the abolition of slavery

- 13.) **Quail Call**- the sound of the quail bird- the term "quail call" comes from the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd"
- 14.) **Slave Catchers/Slavers**- slave catchers were people who hunted down and caught runaway slaves to be returned to their masters or resold; slavers were merchants who sold slaves
- 15.) **Bonnets**- a type of women's hat
- 16.) **Frocks**- a woman's dress
- 17.) **Moses**- in the Bible, Moses led the enslaved Israelites to freedom
- 18.) **Chicken yellow**- a colloquial phrase referring to someone who lacks courage
- 19.) **"Massah"**- a colloquial way of pronouncing the word "master," referring to the white masters who owned black slaves
- 20.) **Plantation**- a large, commercial farming estate
- 21.) **Paregoric**- a kind of opium, or a drug which will make someone sleep
- 22.) **The Union**- the soldiers of the North during the Civil War, fighting for the abolition of slavery and to keep the South from seceding
- 23.) **"Men in blue"**- a colloquial term for union soldiers, who wore blue coats
- 24.) **Harpers Ferry**- the location of a famous armed slave revolt in 1859 led by abolitionist John Brown
- 25.) **Indentured Servants**- people who signed contracts (or "indentures") to work as servants with no wages for a certain number of years in exchange for passage to America, or as punishment for committing a crime

## **Not Underground, Not a Railroad:** Important Historical Figures within and without *Oh, Freedom!*

The Underground Railroad had no train tracks and there were no trains connected to it, though later some slaves did escape by train. Like the origin of the Internet in our own time, the Underground Railroad does not have one inventor or developer. People all over the country, North and South, black and white, participated in the act of helping runaway slaves escape. These people were called "Abolitionists" and included some famous names such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. Some of the main helpers of runaways in the very beginning were the people belonging to a Christian religion called the Religious Society of Friends, better known as the Quakers, because a Quaker leader had said all good Christians must "tremble" or "quake" in the name of the Lord, meaning everybody should be fearful and respectful of God. The Quakers believed that all people contained an inner light from God and therefore they forbade fighting and they forbade slavery. Not all Quakers helped runaway slaves. In fact, only a minority of Quakers did so. But many believe slavery to be wrong. Some of the first great figures in the story of the Underground Railroad were Quakers, including the following:

**Isaac Hopper** (1771-1852): A Quaker who helped runaway slaves in Philadelphia and later New York City and who also helped oversee a school for African-American children in Philadelphia. He founded *The Liberator* newspaper along with William Lloyd Garrison.

**Levi Coffin** (1798-1877): A Quaker who helped runaways in Indiana and later Southern Ohio.

There are many heroes of the Underground Railroad who risked their lives to rescue runaway slaves and it would take a long play indeed to feature them all. Many of the greatest may never be known because rescuing slaves was breaking the law, and many evaded detection so well that we do not know who they are even to this day. Some of the most important people who we do know about are mentioned or depicted in *Oh, Freedom!*:

**Peg Leg Joe** (active in the 1850s): A one-legged sailor who may have been one person or a legendary figure based on many real people. He would visit plantations near Mobile, Alabama, and teach slaves the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd," so they would know how to escape north and would help them along the way.

**William Still** (1821-1902): He ran an office for the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and kept records so that he could reunite runaways with their families. In 1872, he wrote one of the most important books about the Underground Railroad using these records.

**Josiah Henson** (1798-1883): An escaped slave himself, he founded a settlement in Canada for runaway slaves. Canada had outlawed slavery and many fugitives found sanctuary in settlements like Henson's where slave catchers could not follow them. Henson's great kindness to others, including slave catchers who were after him, even nursing one who had been injured at the risk of his own recapture, led many to believe Harriet Beecher Stowe based her main character, Uncle Tom, on him in her ground-breaking anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

**John Rankin** (1795-1886): A preacher against slavery, he made his home in Ripley, Ohio, high on a hill by the Ohio River, and kept a light there for runaway slaves to move toward when they crossed the Ohio River, which separated slave holding Kentucky from free Ohio. He and his family helped hundreds of runaways move further north, even though slave catchers tried to invade and search his home many times. He was friends with Harriet Beecher Stowe, who lived nearby, and many of the runaways that went through the Rankin household were immortalized in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe** (1811-1896): Her 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned many people against slavery. She was a friend of John Rankin, and runaways who passed through his home inspired many of the characters in her book, including Josiah Henson, who supposedly was the basis for Uncle Tom and a young slave mother fleeing with her baby across the iced-over Ohio River, who was depicted as the runaway slave Eliza.

**Harriet Tubman** (1822-1913): Arguably the most successful conductor on the Underground Railroad and later a spy and guide for the Union Army during the Civil War, "General" Tubman evaded slave catchers to single-handedly rescue over 70 slaves and their families on the Underground Railroad and "never lost a passenger."

**Henry "Box" Brown** (1816-after 1889): A Virginia slave who escaped by having himself sealed in a wooden crate three feet long, two feet wide and two feet, six inches deep and mailed to freedom in 1849, arriving at the Underground Railroad office in Philadelphia after 27 hours of being transported (sometimes upside down) on wagons, steam ships and trains. He later wrote about it and traveled the world telling his story, bringing the box around with him.

*Oh, Freedom!* is the story of a great American collaboration. The brave men and women who helped runaways and worked to rid America of slavery came from many lands and were not just relegated to the North, or to one ethnicity. It is important to understand that this supreme example of what Lincoln called "the better angels of nature" is what continues to make us strong as a nation and as citizens of the world.

## About Slavery in America

Slavery was not unique to America. Indeed, it has been around since the beginning of time and is even featured in the Bible. But it can be argued that slavery based on race and purely for economic reasons was an American invention, or certainly was expanded and perfected on a scale few other cultures and nations of the past could match. As the play suggests, the American colonies were always in short supply of workers to grow and manufacture the products that made the land profitable to settlers from Europe. Making sugar from sugarcane in the Caribbean, rice in the marshes of the Carolinas, tobacco in Virginia and Maryland and later cotton in the southern United States was miserable, back-breaking work that often led to an early death for those unfortunate enough to have to do it. When Native Americans died from European diseases or rebelled or ran away and indentured servants (workers who labored for a few years and then were rewarded with land of their own) were in short supply, workers were kidnapped from Africa and elsewhere, and laws were later passed that made slavery connected to skin color, first in Virginia in the late 1600s, and then elsewhere in North America. In many ways, these first "black laws" set in motion practices of enslavement and oppression of "non-whites" that led to the racism that is embedded in American society today. The concept of skin color in terms of "black" and "white" (and "red," among the Native Americans) used to discriminate between peoples, it can be argued, dates from this period, at least in terms of legal and civil rights. Race differences do not exist naturally. We all have the same DNA. Many historians believe race as an idea was invented as part of a way to make money off of the labor of human beings and to divide workers so that they did not rebel against their masters.

Many Americans were against slavery, but the plantation system was so tied up in the American economy, few were willing to end it. In a society where "money is power," many US presidents owned slaves. Indeed, the vast majority of presidents between Washington and Lincoln did. The manufacture of cotton became the most prosperous industry in America before the Civil War, feeding the textile mills of Europe and the Northeast United States. But growing cotton exhausts the soil and eastern plantation owners felt the need to invest in land further west when their own fields started yielding smaller and smaller cotton crops. The American "cotton interest," powerful slaveholding plantation owners, partially drove the expansion of America westward across the continent and certainly was behind the war with Mexico and many of the conflicts with the American Indians that went along with it.

## **Activity: "What Would You Do?"**

The year is 1855, and it is the middle of the night. You are roused from your bed by a knock at the door. It is a man in rags, a runaway slave. He pleads with you to shelter him. People are after him. He has run away from his plantation down south and he wants to get north to freedom. In the distance you hear horses and dogs barking. The slave catchers will be here soon. What would you do?

### **1.) Slam the door in his face and let them catch him**

If you did this, you would be like most people in American in 1855. This is not because most people thought slavery was all right. The Fugitive Slave Law meant that helping runaway slaves was against the law, and you could go to jail, be fined, or both. The fines were so high that you would probably have to sell your house to pay them. Worse, if the slave catchers themselves caught you harboring runaways, they might shoot you or have their dogs attack you because by keeping their property from them (slaves were not considered people, but belongings or property), you would be stealing from them.

### **2.) Give them food, point him to a good place to hide in the woods, and then slam the door in his face**

If you did this, you would be like many people in America who did not like slavery but wanted to stay out of trouble.

### **3.) Take him in and hide him**

If you did this, you would be like a very small minority of people in America. You would also be considered part of the Underground Railroad!

# Study Guide Questions: Engage With the Play

By Anna Miles

Take charge of your theatre-going experience and make it your own by asking yourself questions before, during, and after watching a play.

## Questions to ask before the play:

If you **HAVE** read the play:

How did you envision the set, or the visual world of the play, while reading?

How did you imagine the characters looked while reading the play?

What themes did you notice repeating throughout the play?

What images jumped out at you while reading the play?

How would you describe the central theme of the play in one sentence?

If you **HAVEN'T** read the play:

Do you know anything about the play? If so, what do you know?

In General:

When you think about "theatre," what impressions come to mind? What does "theatre" mean to you?

What do you expect your experience to be when you watch a play? Do you expect to be bored? Excited? Engaged? Curious? Angry? Tired?

## Questions to ask after the play:

If you **READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the production set differ from what you had imagined while reading the play? How was it similar? How did these changes affect your understanding of the story?

Did the characters look different from how you envisioned them looking while reading the play? Did they sound different? Act differently? How did these changes affect your understanding and

opinion of each character? How did these changes affect your understanding of the overall story?

How did the themes and images you noticed while reading translate to performance? Did the same themes and images jump out at you? Did you notice new ones?

Did this particular production seem to have the same central theme, or a different central theme from the one you discovered while reading? What elements of the staging, acting, or design helped convey the theme?

Did they play gain or lose anything in performance? Did you enjoy reading it more, or watching it?

If you **DIDN'T READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the play live up to your expectations? Did it turn out the way you thought it would? Was your knowledge of the play correct?

Were you able to follow the story?

Which part of the story did you most respond to? What themes and images jumped out at you?

Which character did you most relate to? Why?

In General:

How did this production change or confirm your original impressions of "theatre"?

How did your experience watching the play differ from how you expected it would go?

In your own words, how would you summarize the plot of the play? How is the plot different from the story, or the thematic implications, in the play?

Did you feel the story was relevant to your life? How and why?

Did you feel the story said something about our society, or about the world at large? If so, what?

Do you feel this story is an important one to tell and keep telling? How and why?

What kind of stories do you most respond to?

# Theatre Etiquette

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not speak on the phone or text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to the show about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance unless you are encouraged by the performers to participate.
- Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in musical theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors and can cause a mishap. It can also be a violation of an actor's contract.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over... this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great (a standing ovation). Do not whistle, stomp your feet, or scream out to the performers except for a Bravo or Brava.

## Additional Resources

***Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement*** by Fergus M. Bordewich

***Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden Story of the Underground Railroad*** by Eric Foner

***The Underground Railroad*** by William Still (1872)

***STEAL AWAY: Songs of the Underground Railroad*** performed by Kim and Reggie Harris for Appleseed Records

***The Underground Railroad- A History***

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad>

***The Underground Railroad- PBS***

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>

***The Secret of the Underground Railroad***

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-secret-history-of-the-underground-railroad/384966/>

***Slavery in America***

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>

***Slavery and Remembrance***

<http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0011>