

FREEDOM TRAIN



Study Guide

About the Play

Harriet Tubman (1815?-1913), born a slave, devoted all of her time to freeing others. She was a strong and powerful person, and a woman of action. To help her through times of great stress and confusion she turned to prayer. One of the prayers that always gave her great strength was "Lord, you have been with me through six troubles, be with me through the seventh." She repeatedly faced danger and possible death at state boundary lines dividing freedom from slavery and became so famous for doing so that her nickname, "Moses," echoed from the plantations of the South to the free "promised land" of the North. She is one of the few women of her time to have had several books written about her during her lifetime.

Harriet was 25 when she made her perilous escape from a Maryland plantation, leaving her family and all other loved ones behind. During those times a woman -- especially a black woman -- traveling alone was unheard of. Nonetheless, pursued by murderous slave catchers who would do anything to catch her and collect the very large rewards being offered for her capture (including tracking her with dogs), she followed an escape route laid out by a community of people called "Quakers." Secret hiding places along the route included churches, cellars, barns and homes. When she finally arrived in Philadelphia (out of "Egypt" and into the "Promised Land") she said, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything! The sun came through like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

The escape route that Harriet followed was known as the **Underground Railroad**, and through her skill as a woodswoman and her bravery, she quickly became one of its most celebrated "conductors." Up creek beds, through swamps, over hills, through dark and dangerous wooded areas, on a total of nineteen secret trips, Harriet Tubman led more than 300 slaves (including the rest of her family) to freedom. In her papers she wrote, "I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger."

FREEDOM TRAIN tells the story of Harriet Tubman -- the "Moses" of her people -- in an exciting series of highly theatrical scenes that use mime, as well as the language, clothing, and music of the period. **FREEDOM TRAIN** is a story about courage, dedication, equality, and survival against all odds; it is also laced with love, warmth, and a sense of humor that celebrates the human spirit. It is a universal story that speaks to people of all races, religions, and ages.

BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY:

1. Discuss the concept of slavery, inviting the class to tell, draw, or improvise feelings of being enslaved. Discuss slavery as an institution. Keep notes for a class discussion after the performance.

2. How do people become enslaved -- by poverty, by a bad habit, by accident of birth, etc.? How does this expand your definition of slavery?
3. Discuss the old South in words and pictures, giving a representative viewpoint of the period. Compare and contrast the old South with the new South. What are some of the reasons for the differences?
4. What did it mean to be black during the time of slavery? What did it mean to be white? What does each mean today? Ask students of one race what they think it would feel like to be of a different race.
5. Do you think that black people are in some ways enslaved today? If so, how?

AFTER SEEING THE PLAY:

1. What was the **Underground Railroad**? What sort of "underground" systems do we have in our society and why do they exist? Are they necessary?
2. Play and/or discuss some of the traditional music from the period, beginning with the songs in the play (such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd," "Steal Away," and "Get on Board."). Why was this music created? Are there "messages" in more recent music (U2, Nirvana, Public Enemy, R.E.M., Biggie Smalls, Rage Against the Machine, Beastie Boys, etc.)? Are there some styles of music that seem more suited to delivering a message than others?
3. Ask the students why they think Harriet Tubman did what she did. (For herself? For her people? For white as well as black people? For an ideal?) Is it important to develop that same sort of commitment as individuals in today's society? How can we do this?
4. Can you name other people who fight for human rights?
5. Discuss the Supreme Court's Dred Scott Decision (mentioned in the play). How did it affect the quality of life in the North and in the South?
6. Review the students' discussion of the "concept of slavery" and "slavery as an institution" held before seeing the play. After seeing FREEDOM TRAIN, have their ideas been changed?

For Further Research

1. What was being a female slave like -- were there specific issues that black women had to deal with in the time of slavery?
2. What were conditions like for blacks in the North during this time period? What does "being sold down South" mean? Why did blacks have this fear?

3. Discuss the abolitionist movement in the United States. What kind of people were abolitionists -- male, female, Northerners, Southerners, of a certain religion? Was the movement totally united? Does it tie in with any other reform movements during that time?
 4. How did the Civil War and the abolition of slavery affect the economic system in the U.S.? Were the effects different in the North and in the South?
 5. Were there other countries that imported slaves from Africa and elsewhere? If so, what were conditions like for these slaves?
 6. Who were some other slaves who made great achievements? (e.g., Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Wheatley.)
-

Suggested Bibliography

Brackett, Jeffrey. The Negro in Maryland: The Study of the Institution of Slavery. Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York, 1969.

Breyfogle, William. Make Free: Story of the Underground Railroad. J.B.Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1958.

Carlson, Judy. Harriet Tubman. New York, 1989.

Childress, Alice. When the Rattlesnake Sounds. (Play) New York, 1975.

Haley, Alex. Roots. Garden City, New York, 1976.

Mannix, Daniel P. Black Cargo: History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865. Viking Press, New York, 1962.

McGovern, Ann. Runaway Slave. Scholastic Book Series, New York, 1965.

Petry, Ann. Conductor of the Underground Railroad. Crowell Publishers, New York, 1955.

Schroeder, Alan. Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman. Dial Books, New York, 1996.
(A good choice for young readers, this fictionalized account of Harriet Tubman's life is told through the eyes of Harriet as a child, nicknamed AMinty, and is illustrated with rich watercolors.)

Still, William. The Underground Railroad. Arno Press, New York, 1968.

Williams, Eric. Capitalism and Slavery. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 19

FREEDOM TRAIN

Word Match

Word Match

INSTRUCTIONS

Match these words with their correct definitions by connecting them with a line.

Posse

Emancipation Proclamation

Bounty Hunter

Fugitive Slave Laws

Plantation

Quakers

Underground Superintendent

Safe Houses

Underground Railroad

Mason-Dixon Line

Spiritual

Abolitionist

Fugitive

Auction

- A. a person who supported the movement to abolish, or end slavery and the slave trade in the United States.
- B. a public sale in which goods are sold to those who offer the most money.
- C. a person who tracks down and captures outlaws in return for a reward.
- D. the proclamation issued by President Lincoln in September, 1862, effective January 1, 1863, by which the Negroes held in slavery in the Confederate States, then in rebellion against the United States were declared to be free.
- E. a person who flees; a runaway.
- F. a number of laws that regulated the return of slaves who had escaped.
- G. the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, that before the Civil War became known as the border between the slave states of the South and the free states of the North.
- H. a large farm on which crops, such as cotton, tobacco, or sugar, are grown and harvested.
- I. a group of people temporarily organized to conduct a search.
- J. the term used to describe members of a religion called the Society of Friends. It was first used by George Fox, the founder of the religion, who told the members of the church to "tremble at the word of the Lord."
- K. a term used by the Underground Railroad to describe houses belonging to people involved in helping Negro slaves to escape.
- L. a deeply emotional and religious folk song that became a musical tradition among American blacks in the South.
- M. in the United States before 1861, a system set up by certain opponents of slavery to help fugitive slaves from the South escape to free States and Canada.
- N. the head of a certain section of the Underground Railroad.

*Special thanks to
Clowes Memorial Hall
Indianapolis, IN
for developing this handout*

theatreworksUSA
151 West 26th Street 212.647.1100
New York, NY 10001 www.twusa.org

