The Chapel Hill News

Weekend!

Friday
JANUARY 15, 1993

'Freedom Train' roars into Chapel Hill-Carrboro

▸By ALAN R. HALL
Correspondent

A REVIEW

CHAPEL HILL — Harriett Tubman, despite the fact that she grew up a slave, became one of the most successful people to ever attempt her chosen life's work. In pre-Civil War Maryland, Tubman was a "conductor." The "train" on which she worked ran the imaginary rails of the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was still new when Tubman first encountered it. With the help of Quakers and other anti-slavery individuals, she used the railroad to escape to freedom farther north. Passage on this route was booked with courage, strength and a desire to escape the punishing and often brutal realities of being owned by another human being.

Once free and in Philadelphia, Tubman realized she had a duty to her family and to all slaves to escort as many people as she could through the treacherous passage to freedom. Her story is one of courage few people can claim, and of faith that she would succeed because what she was doing was right.

Theatreworks/USA of New York is touring a play that tells the story of Tubman and her dangerous excursions south, 19 trips in all that freed more than 300. In storytelling, music and dramatic action, Harriett Tubman tells her own story in "Freedom Train," an 80-minute production that is riveting and exciting. It is also a challenge to seven young actors who perform the show as often as twice a day, and always in a different theater. These actors bring the harrowing story to life, with live action, a strong spiritual-based singing ensemble, and a powerful staging that uses every inch of the elevated, raked stage that they carry with them.

Tubman is played by Rochelle C. Lee in a spirited and multi-hued portrayal. Lee goes through a myriad of emotions from desperate fear to a jubilant feeling of casting off chains; she also experiences marriage, destitution, courage and a steely nerve. Lee lends herself to each of these with skill and animation, and she leads this ensemble with energy and exuberance.

Michael Bunce and Michael Dillinger each play multiple roles in this condensed biography; between the two of them they make up all the white folks Harriett encounters. The roles are a bit like Good Cop/Bad Cop; Bunce plays most of the despicable characters in the show while Dillinger plays most of the good guys. Central characters are Bunce's Overseer, a smug, brutal and easily despised man who revels in his personal disgust of blacks. Bunce does a very good job of making us hate him on sight; which means he succeeds nicely with his characterization. Dillinger, on the other hand, plays the Quaker, Brother Jacob, who risks his own life to see that escaped slaves are expedited to Pennsylvania, where they can be free. He, too, succeeds nicely, as indicated by the amount of applause elicited by his cunning deception of the Overseer.

Harriett's family is her father, Ben (Robert Andrews); her mother, Rit (Carmen Irene White); and her two brothers, David (Troy Christopher) and Willie (William Hines). This core of family is also the core of the music in this play, a selection of spirituals that are known for sustaining the slaves during their long trial. These songs are inspiring and sung with style and deep emotion. "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" tells the fleeing slave to look ever northward, using the Big Dipper, or the Gourd, as a guide; the quartet that is Harriett's family sings it with heartfelt desire. "Wade in the Water" is another escape hymn, instructing the traveler to ford streams and creeks to throw off the following hounds. The brutality that was afforded slaves in the 1800s is not glossed over; beatings, disfigurement and being hunted by hounds were all commonplace practices.

As the reward for her capture increased, Harriett became known as "Moses," one who leads her people to the promised land. Her eminent arrival would be heralded with the spiritual "Good News, (Chariot's A-Comin')," as more and more slaves made use of her "railroad." She was never caught and seldom even detected; in her later years she would tell her story to her children: "I never run my train off the track; and I never lost a passenger." Her success was an incredible achievement, and she is still revered as a pioneer in the movement to gain freedom for all slaves.

This particular script is designed with young people in mind; target ages are between the third and eighth grades. It is a stimulating, thought-provoking piece, and it brings to life aspects of a history that may be old and stale in the history books. This cast and this production bring history to life for its young audience, and present particularly well the horrors that slaves had to overcome. Yet it is surprisingly upbeat, as a courageous lady inspires those around her to seek their heart's desire on the "Freedom Train."

Attendance at the ArtsCenter was standing room only; this after a performance that afternoon in the Carrboro Elementary School.