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# BWW Reviews: STEEL HAMMER Brings Legendary SITI Company Back to Humana Festival

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by Todd Zeigler

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Intentional or not, a theme is emerging within this year's Humana Festival of New American Plays: Identity.

"Partners" lays bare the struggle of the younger generation to plant its feet in adulthood. "The Christians" probes how greatly an earnest change of heart can upend one's entire life.

"brownsville song (b-side for tray)" fights to put a face and a story to the type of young men who by the misfortune of where they live often become tragic statistics.

This year's final full-length offering, "Steel Hammer" from the world-renowned SITI Company and legendary director Anne

Bogart, compares a man to his myth and explores all the dimensions one person's story can develop.

Ask someone about the legend of John Henry and you might get the basics: a steel-driving railroad worker who went up against a steam-powered engine in a contest of speed, beat it and died. Ask what the legend means, and the responses might not be so uniform. Some might say it's a story of the power of the individual against soulless mechanization. Others might say the daily, inescapable toil of backbreaking labor. What the perception of the "steel-drivin' man" says about the multifaceted, ever-evolving American identity is the driving force behind "Steel Hammer."

In the hands of SITI Company, Actors Theatre here presents a piece of performance - "theater" is too limiting a word - unlike anything seen around here for many years, perhaps since the company's last presentation at Third and Main.

"Steel Hammer" actually began as a Pulitzer Prize-nominated experimental music piece courtesy of Julia Wolfe and the New York-based international music collective Bang on a Can, and it is Wolfe's haunting folk-based score that drives the majority of the piece. Wolfe approached Bogart about staging it as a "musical" (using the term loosely), and the master of theatrical innovation applied SITI Company's multidisciplinary approach to the project.

One of the principle reasons SITI Company is world renowned is for the diversity of artistic languages it uses. "Steel Hammer" isn't simply a play. It's a communicative exposition - or, as the program suggests, a storytelling contest. Bogart recruited four playwrights - Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor - to apply their own perspective to the John Henry legend. Yet plainspoken, straightforward dramatic dialogue drives very little of the action. The six-person ensemble incorporates dance, song, storytelling circles, chants, a jamboree-style drum circle and more to create an entrancing, emotional ride that will show local audiences all that theater is capable of.

All this should spell out that "Steel Hammer" is certainly no straightforward play. From one point of view, this is a showcase of impeccably crafted and executed artistry from a multitude of fields delivered by a finely-tuned ensemble

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the cast runs in a circle for five to 10 minutes and you are expected to abide.

At an hour and 55 minutes of performance (without an intermission), this is not an easy piece, but also not a love-it-or-hate-it piece. The textures and styles are so well-integrated and the pacing so carefully managed that there is some part to appeal to every sensibility. While the gentleman to my left would slump, check his watch and raise his eyes to the sky at a few of the more esoteric moments, he would (presumably) unconsciously bob along to the infectious groove of the ensemble's percussive riffing at other points. A good measure of a show's power for me is how much I squirm over the course of the production. I barely moved.

It is tricky and counterintuitive to single out members of an ensemble whose mission statement - and success - is based around the effort of the collective. But a show about man and myth needs an actor who can embody the full spectrum in between, and **Eric Berryman** does marvelous work showing the full gamut of experience and emotions that turns a man into a folktale. He is ably joined in his work by the SITI Ensemble of **Patrice Johnson** Chevannes, **Akiko Aizawa**, Gian-Murray Gianino, Barney O'Hanlon and **Stephen Duff Webber**, who demonstrate beguiling diversity of skill and commitment to their ensemble effort throughout.

Page 2 »

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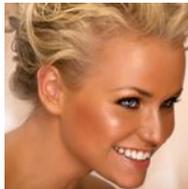
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