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## REVIEW | SITI Company Explodes John Henry Myth in 'Steel Hammer'

By [ERIN KEANE](#) ([PEOPLE/ERIN-KEANE](#))



Eric Berryman and the cast of "Steel Hammer," 38th Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 2014.

*Credit Michael Brosilow / Actors Theatre of Louisville*

The 38th Humana Festival of New American Plays continues with another dynamic opening night at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Directed by the legendary Anne Bogart, "Steel Hammer," a movement-heavy musical ode to and interrogation of American folklore hero John Henry opened last night with an impressive performance in the Victor Jory Theatre.

"Steel Hammer" brings together strong work from an impressive slate of artists - playwrights Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor, with recorded music and lyrics by Julia Wolfe with Bang on a Can All-Stars and Trio Mediaval, all brought to life on stage by Bogart's SITI Company.

John Henry, the legend goes, was an African American prisoner who worked on the railroad expansion. A giant of a man with superhuman strength, the myth, as immortalized in songs like "The Ballad of John Henry," pitted him against a steam-powered hammer, and he won, though the contest cost him his life. The play does the legend one better by not only celebrating this victory of man against technology but presenting a more historically-accurate portrayal of how the real John Henry likely lived and died, and how emblematic Henry was and is of a country built on the backs of

forced labor.

"Steel Hammer" moves along the historic-fantasy continuum from basic folklore retelling to a powerful contemporary scene that blows the myth out to an indictment of America's on-going civil rights issue, the prison-industrial complex. Scenes aren't credited in the program to individual playwrights, but this act and an extended monologue by Patrice Johnson Chevannes as an old woman remembering a chance encounter with a man she believes to have been Henry stand out in a strong field of text.

The performances in "Steel Hammer" are tour de force-level feats of physical mastery and dramatic control. Eric Berryman and Chevannes shine as Henry and his legendary wife Polly Anne, but every member of the ensemble (Akiko Aizawa, Gian-Murry Gianino, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Duff Webber) leaves it all on the stage by the last scene.

For those unfamiliar with SITI Company's style, expect to see an emphasis on choreographed movement and dramatic gesture. In other words, what the body is doing and where it is in relation to the other bodies on stage is just as important as what's being said. There are moments in "Steel Hammer" when this technique elevates as scene to pure magic - the closing of the show is a moving tableau that illustrates both the beauty and the horror of hard human labor - but other scenes that pair only movement with Wolfe's music carry on a bit long for their dramatic worth. The music's not at fault - Wolfe's beautiful and haunting alt-folk compositions deserve their own standing ovation. (The album of the same name [goes on sale April 29](http://bangonacan.org/store/music/steel_hammer) ([http://bangonacan.org/store/music/steel\\_hammer](http://bangonacan.org/store/music/steel_hammer)).) But had the band been live, those scenes would amaze. Set to recorded music, the extended scene of actors running around the perimeter of the circular stage, for example, looks and feels artificial to the point of straining suspension of disbelief.

"Steel Hammer" is the final mainstage play to open in this year's festival, which boasts the strongest field of work in recent memory. New work is often in a much more delicate place than these fully-realized productions are, making this year's festival truly a can't-lose event. [Read all WFPL coverage of the Humana Festival here](http://wfpl.org/term/humana-festival-new-american-plays) (<http://wfpl.org/term/humana-festival-new-american-plays>). The festival closes April 6. Three ten-minute plays will open and run for the final weekend only.

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