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THEATER

Review: In 'Steel Hammer,' a Man and a Train in a Race and a Legend

Next Wave: Steel Hammer | Off Broadway, Experimental (Incl. All Music Forms), Special Event, Musical | Closing Date: December 6, 2015 | Brooklyn Academy of Music - Harvey Lichtenstein Theater, 651 Fulton St. | 718-636-4100

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD DEC. 3, 2015

Julia Wolfe's galvanizing score — alternately clamorous, haunting, exhilarating and sometimes all three simultaneously — provides a sturdy musical spine for "Steel Hammer," a theatrical meditation on the legend of John Henry being presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music through Sunday.

Not familiar with John Henry's amazing exploits? Try YouTube. According to "Steel Hammer," there are more than 500 recordings of various folk songs written about John Henry available on that website. "Then they got tired and wrote, 'Less relevant items not displayed,'" as one of the narrators in the opening section wryly remarks.

Whether an actual John Henry lived or not, he entered American folklore, in the late 19th century, as a black railroad worker who won a race against a

steam engine, boring a tunnel through a mountain with only the power of his muscles — and that steel sledgehammer — to drive him.

He may have won the competition, but his achievement was said to have cost him his life, making his story resonate powerfully on several levels: as an allegory of the human cost of industrialization, as a parable about the cruel lives of African-Americans in the years after the Civil War, as a tall tale that inspired other yarns about superhuman, even superheroic, achievements.

“Steel Hammer” is an odd and not always satisfying hybrid: Four playwrights — Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor — have provided short plays or monologues performed by members of SITI Company, under the direction of Anne Bogart. These are spliced into Ms. Wolfe’s score, which is performed with driving intensity and joyous spontaneity by the Bang on a Can All Stars.

When the music predominates, all is well. Ms. Wolfe draws on variations in the legend for her lyrics, striking in simplicity and similar to the repetitive murmurings in the operatic works of Philip Glass. The vocalists Emily Eagen, Katie Geissinger and Molly Quinn provide a beautiful tone and a few subdued hints of soulful ardor.

The words explore the many differences in the stories and songs about John Henry:

He was smallHe was tallHe was black He was true He was false

None of the songs or tales can even agree on where he was born, or lived and died. Another passage simply lists the places he’s said to be from: Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio, Kentucky.

The music for the vocal sections is cool and shimmering. But Ms. Wolfe, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her oratorio “Anthracite Fields,” about life in the

Pennsylvania coal mines, draws on more animated folk music sounds for much of the score. (In a program note, she says her work was inspired by her love for Appalachian music.) Thrilling percussion-led riffs send the music soaring, only to subside, giving way to brooding conversations between bass and cello. The harmonica, banjo and mountain dulcimer (an instrument new to me) also play significant roles.

Having seen the show at its premiere at the Humana Festival of New American Plays last year, when it was performed to recorded music, I found it thrilling to hear Ms. Wolfe's score with a real band onstage.

The spoken sections of "Steel Hammer" are not as uniformly exciting. They explore, in varying styles and tones, the legend's importance to African-American culture. In one version, John Henry, portrayed throughout with suitably heroic energy by Eric Berryman, was born in New Jersey but was imprisoned in Virginia on a "trumped-up" charge, serving his term before being "farmed out to the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad," where his strength inspired the competition that cost him his life.

Most of the stories agree that John Henry had a wife named Polly Ann (or variations thereof), but little else is known, and much of the text is a combination of a loose fantasia on his life and a lecture on its significance. Sometimes it's witty and warm, sometimes pedantic and repetitive. It matches the fragmentary nature of Ms. Wolfe's lyrics, but sung fragments of text are more easily digested than spoken ones.

Mr. Berryman is supported by a cast of five — Akiko Aizawa, Patrice Johnson Chevannes, Gian-Murray Gianino, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Duff Webber — who portray the characters in the tale in different incarnations, and also provide informative commentary. (We are told that if John Henry did die on the job, it was probably from silicosis: pollution of the lungs from inhaling fragments of rock in the tunnels).

In keeping with the theme of hard labor, the performances are intensely

physical. At one point the cast, or most of it, anyway, runs at a brisk jog around the wooden platform that constitutes most of the set. In a more entertaining but also physically intense passage, the cast members assemble in a circle on those chairs, along with Mark Stewart from the band, to make pulsating, thrillingly pure music with just their hands and feet.

I wasn't surprised, however, by walkouts during the nearly two-hour, intermissionless production. (Actually, walkouts during any two-hour, intermissionless production wouldn't surprise me.) Too often, the playwrights' contributions feel like unwelcome interruptions that drag on and keep feeding us the same bits of lore in different packages.

Perhaps there's a reason the John Henry legend has lived on most memorably in music. Whether man or myth, he certainly receives his noble due in Ms. Wolfe's powerful score — and maybe a few more thousand hits on YouTube.

Next Wave: Steel Hammer

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bam.org: <http://www.bam.org>

Category Off Broadway, Experimental (Incl. All Music Forms), Special Event, Musical

Credits Composed by Julia Wolfe; Directed by Anne Bogart

Opened December 2, 2015

Closing Date December 6, 2015

This information was last updated: Dec. 5, 2015

Steel Hammer Music and lyrics by Julia Wolfe; original text by Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor; music performed by the Bang on a Can All-Stars; play performed and created by SITI Company; sets and costumes by James Schuette; lighting by Brian H. Scott; sound by Andrew Cotton and

Christian Frederickson; choreography by Barney O'Hanlon; production stage manager, Ellen Mezzera. A Julia Wolfe and SITI Company, Michelle Preston, executive director; and Bang on a Can All-Stars, Kenny Savelson, executive director, production, presented as part of the Next Wave Festival by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Katy Clark, president, Joseph V. Melillo, executive producer. Through Sunday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene; 718-636-4100, bam.org. Running time: 1 hour 55 minutes.

WITH: Akiko Aizawa, Eric Berryman, Patrice Johnson Chevannes, Gian-Murray Gianino, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Duff Webber; and Ashley Bathgate, Robert Black, Vicky Chow, David Cossin, Mark Stewart and Ken Thomson (Bang on a Can All-Stars); and Emily Eagen, Katie Geissinger and Molly Quinn (vocalists).

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