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Steel Hammer: A Living Cubist Portrait of John Henry

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by David Dudley

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As far as I'm concerned, *accelerationism* is best defined—in political, aesthetic, and philosophical terms—as the argument that the only way out is the way through. In order to overcome globalized neo-liberal capitalism, we need to drain it to the dregs, push it to its most extreme point, follow it into its furthest and strangest consequences. As Bertolt Brecht put it years ago, “Don’t start from the good old things but the new bad ones.” The hope is that, by exacerbating our current conditions of existence, we will finally be able to make them explode, and thereby move beyond them. —Steven Shaviro, from *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism*

There's a moment in *Steel Hammer*, which draws on the myriad accounts of the John Henry myth, in which Polly Ann (played by Patrice Johnson Chevannes) visits her husband, John Henry (played by Eric Berryman) in prison. Henry tells Polly Ann that it's time to go their separate ways:

Polly, why you waitin' on me. You know I ain't getting' outta here. First they say, when you work our fields, then we'll let you out of here, then they say, when you build our railroads, then, and only then, will we let you out, then they said, when you fight our wars, no no, when you buy our drugs, no no no, when you work with us on this drug war thing, you play your part, then we promise you John Henry, you'll be released.







Eric Berryman (center) plays John Henry in *Steel Hammer*, a collaboration between the SITI Company and the Bang On a Can All-Stars. In the rear, from left, are: Akiko Aizawa, Stephen Duff Weber, Barney O'Hanlon, and Patrice Johnson Chevannes. Photo by Bridget Lee-Calfas.

The opening-night audience at the **Krannert Center** (<http://krannertcenter.com/>) , in Urbana, Illinois, let out a painful laugh as Henry summed up his situation. Not the kind of laugh compelled by well-executed comedy, but the kind that leaps out of one's throat, unexpectedly, against one's will, during a moment of dreadful recognition. The absurd circumstances that describe such tragedies are simply too painful to absorb without some kind of bodily reaction. For that single, brief paragraph (written by Will Power) carries the weight of hundreds of years' worth of injustice, innumerable hours of forced labor, and a cloud of witnesses that, if resurrected, would engulf us all.





From left: Mark Stewart, Robert Black, and Ashley Bathgate, of the Bang On a Can All-Stars. Photo by Bridget Lee-Calfas.

Polly Ann, in her way, fights to hold on to her dream. She simply wants the man she loves to return home. Alas Henry will not be returning home.

“I’m just a man and a man can’t do nothin’ against history,” Henry says. “And history say . . . John, you know how the song go. John Henry dies with a hammer in his hand.”

Defeated, Polly Ann relents. But she isn’t prepared to let that be the end for her beloved.

“I won’t say nothing about prison,” Polly Ann says, considering their children. “And I’ll make you six foot five instead of five foot two. And I’ll make up something about you beatin’ a steam engine . . . And you died a hero. How does that sound?”

Battling soul-crushing despair, Henry cracks a smile. “It sounds . . .” he begins, but pauses, “it sounds just fine.”

Of course no single moment could sum up the totality of Henry’s myth. *Steel Hammer* shows various versions of how this timeless story may have begun, and suggests how it hasn’t yet ended.

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But *Steel Hammer* didn't begin there. Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Julia Wolfe, first wrote the piece as an evening-length cantata for the **Trio Mediaeval** (<http://www.triomedieval.no/>) and the **Bang on a Can All-Stars** (http://bangonacan.org/bang_on_a_can_all_stars) . “The starting point was sound—a raw, rich gritty sound,” Wolfe said via email. “I kept coming back to the John Henry Ballad. I became fascinated with the fact that there were so many versions of the ballad, hundreds of them, all with different ‘facts.’”



Polly Ann (Chevannes), comforts John Henry (Berryman), as Graham (Aizawa) watches on in the background. Photo by Bridget Lee-Calfas.

Wolfe kept returning to the central theme of man against machine, portrayed in Henry's fight against the steam engine, which was consistent through nearly all of ballads.

In *Characteristics*, the fifth movement of the score, Wolfe's lyrics capture the contradictions found in different versions of Henry's story:

He was small
He was tall
He was black
He was white
He was true
He was false

“When I found the version in which John Henry’s woman ‘Polly Ann, or Liza Ann, or Mary Ann’ drove steel ‘like a man’ when John Henry took sick to bed,” Wolfe said, “I thought that is a sign, and I got to work.”

Like Wolfe, director Anne Bogart (co-Artistic Director of **SITI Company** (<http://siti.org/>)) was drawn to the various, and often contradictory threads of the Henry myth. So when Joe Melillo (Executive Producer of the **Brooklyn Academy of Music** (<http://www.bam.org/about>)) introduced Wolfe and Bogart, Bogart was keen to collaborate on the project.

Bogart then invited playwrights Kia Corthron, Carl Hancock Rux, Will Power, and Regina Taylor to write ten-minute versions of the John Henry myth. “Write a piece on what John Henry means to you,” Bogart said to the playwrights, “but don't talk to each other. I want the pieces to be as different as they can be.”

That prompt produced four very different, and equally dynamic plays that provided a structure for the performance. Each text slightly differs from the others, yet they share common thematic and narrative threads.

“There are so many versions that none of us can know which is ‘right’,” Bogart said. “This is one strong take on what it means.”

Which raises an important question: In today’s world, what does the John Henry myth mean? For each artist who helped to co-create *Steel Hammer*, the answers are slightly different yet similar.

Wolfe returned again and again to “the tension between human and machine.”

Bogart focused on “the power of storytelling, the dangers of work, and the Black Lives Matter movement.”

Choreographer and performer Barney O'Hanlon composed physical movements that embody working to the point of exhaustion, or in the case of John Henry, death.

“It’s not too difficult to find shapes and movements that reflect those themes,” O'Hanlon said. “The trick is not to ‘act’ them. You can’t act being tired or exhausted, it doesn’t work. Fortunately, this piece is physically exhausting. The bodies were dealing with physically difficult tasks over and over.”

“I knew that I didn’t want the performance to be about work,” Bogart said, “I wanted it to *be* work. The message of the piece, for me, is slow the fuck down. If you don’t slow down, you’ll die.”



Stephen Duff Weber takes the lead in building a human machine. This dance, from the Step dance tradition, was choreographed by Eric Berryman. Photo by Bridget Lee-Calfas.

This is where the grand metaphors that make up the mythical John Henry give way to the real John Henry.

Playwright Regina Taylor began her process with a question: Who was the real John Henry? What she found was that the story of John Henry keeps repeating itself.

“The real John Henry was a young black man who was picked up under the auspices of the Black Codes, and forced into hard labor,” Taylor said.

There’s the myth of John Henry, but then there are all of these John Henrys—young black men who were incarcerated and forced into slave labor—from then and on through now. For every one that dies, another is picked up and put in his place. It’s like Sisyphus; the way slave labor is passed down from generation to generation.

As Taylor pointed out, the real John Henry likely died from breathing little bits of rock into his lungs, much like coal miners. Taylor’s text, which includes multiple John Henrys, serves to further refract the mythical figure of John Henry:

All I know is
From can't see
To can't see
Hundreds upon hundreds
Like me
Names ain't writ down
(down)
so people forget.

“All of these young black men were literally worked to death,” Taylor said. “They were incarcerated, they had no rights. They were made to dig and blast these tunnels, building the railroads.” For Taylor, John Henry’s name is emblematic of the countless injustices perpetuated against African-American men since slavery.

Steel Hammer is not about work, it is work. The performance, then, is not about time: it is time.

“The problem is time . . .” Polly Ann says in Carl Hancock Rux’s text, *Migrant Mamie Remembers John Henry*. She continues: “time as a horizon. Time for the understanding of being. Life. Death. Struggle. Food. Peace. Shelter. Place to rest. Rest stop. Field House. Somewhere before home. Night fallin’. Someplace 'fore pig guts go bad.”

In a blog entry from rehearsal, O’Hanlon wrote, “Time is a character in *Steel Hammer*. We are constantly engaged by a study of time. Our human ability to keep up with the measures on the page as we are hearing them in our ears. The tempo of each action, movement, and sequence.”

The Colwell Playhouse stage was purposefully left raw, and sparse. There was a wooden platform (that Bogart and company called the clock) built at center-stage. There were other platforms behind and to

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Bogart and company called the clock, built at center stage. There were other platforms behind and to either side of the clock, upon which the musicians and singers performed. Bare cinder blocks, ladders, and the cage mark the space's boundaries. There was no attempt to hide these materials; rather, they were illuminated by splashes of cool blue and naked tungsten. There's no time for scenery, and really no need for it in this world. Bodies in motion, the vibrations set off by voices and instruments, and their relationships to a few carefully selected objects are all that's needed to embody our struggles with time in the theatre.

The question may not be: How fast can we go? But rather: How fast do we need to go?

"That's the theatre's job right now," Bogart said. "In the 1990s, I used to ask young directors what they would do with MTV time. 'Are you going to try and get faster than that?' I'd ask. That was fast then. Now MTV time is ancient. Electronic time is so fast. Gratification is so fast."

"There is a real problem," Ellen Lauren agreed. "With all of these time signatures co-existing. Culturally speaking, we've become so fractured."

"If we go back to Greek plays and stories," Ingulsrud added,

there are recurring themes of the parent killing the child and the child killing the parent. Technology is essentially our child. We created it. We have to ask: What's it doing to us? What are we doing to it? Is it living up to our expectations, our dreams? Or is it betraying us? It's part of our daily lives, it's part of our bodies, but we still haven't digested it. It's a primal struggle. On a mythological level, that's what we're dealing with.

"And so our job as theatre artists," Bogart concluded, "is to ask: What other time signatures might we experience? There are so few places and times that we can share where different time signatures exist. The theatre is one of those places."

When considering the John Henry myth, we're often led to focus on the romantic, heroic aspects of John Henry. An audience member in the Krannert lobby summed up what *Steel Hammer* meant to her in the taut, punchy language of a headline: "Man conquers machine!"

That's certainly one way to see it. Henry did conquer the machine. But was Henry a conqueror? Or was he a victim who, after suffering years of brutal oppression, took hold of his own destiny?

In his collection of essays on accelerationism, Steven Shaviro wrote, "The only way out is the way through . . . The hope is that, by exacerbating our current conditions of existence, we will finally be able to make them explode, and thereby move beyond them."

Shaviro's words suggest a blind faith mostly familiar to saints. There's something at once terrifying and hopeful in that notion. It's also an apt expression for a man who died racing a steam drill through a

mountain. Henry's race with the machine may be read as an attempt to exacerbate the conditions of his time, to explode them.

Henry won the race. Yet, in doing so, he sacrificed his own life. Sadly, History shows us that Henry did not achieve any lasting change to the system that imprisoned him. Some say he won that race. Some say he

“But was Henry a conqueror? Or was he a victim who, after suffering years of brutal oppression, took hold of his own destiny?”

When asked why Henry would agree to the competition that would ultimately lead to death, Taylor paused for a moment. Then she said: “He tries to break free by winning the contest. He tries to blast his way to freedom, but the reality of it is that he achieves freedom only through death. That’s the tragedy of John Henry’s situation.”

However, the performance doesn't end on such a hopeless note. Bogart's directorial touch imbues this rendering of John Henry's timeless story with hope. The final image of the play shows Henry, who has just won his race with the drill, walking slowly, deliberately, out of the tunnel. He holds a lantern in his hand so he can find the way out.

“That last moment could be interpreted as Henry dying,” Bogart said. “But it could also be Henry walking on towards a better future for African Americans.”

The final image is a hopeful one, for it marks the first moment in the performance—which Bogart and Wolfe intended to be an endurance test for performers and audiences alike—where there is silence, and, but for Henry's peaceful exit, stillness. It is a brief respite before the real work of reevaluating our relationship with technology, and rebuilding our communities must begin.

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