

Folk hero brought to life

Production about John Henry features music from Pulitzer winner

By MELISSA MERLI
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URBANA — John Henry was an African-American folk hero.

Or, he might have been a white man.

No matter, he's said to have been the strongest "steel-driving man" as he drilled holes through rock to build railroad tunnels a century ago.

The question of who Henry was is the "whole essence" of "Steel Hammer," a SITI Company stage production to be presented Saturday night at Krannert Center, said composer Julia Wolfe, whose "Steel Hammer" music makes up the score for the new show.

Wolfe, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Music this year for "Anthracite Fields," wrote the score for "Steel Hammer" — before the stage show was conceived, basing it on part of the 200 ballads about John Henry.

While researching them and the folk hero, Wolfe discovered there were people who swore their grandfather worked right next to him on the railroad and people who claimed Henry came from different states.

"The interviews with people who talk about him are fascinating," she said. "Clearly, he meant so many different things to so many different people."

Another basic theme of "Steel Hammer" is man versus machine. Most John Henry ballads cover that topic as well, Wolfe said, particularly how Henry raced the steam engine, winning but dying as a result of having driven himself so hard.

As Wolfe considered all she had discovered, she settled for her music upon a "certain folk music sensibility." Like most of her compositions, "Steel Hammer" also incorporates elements of minimalism and rock.

Anne Bogart, an award-winning director, author and professor at Columbia University, entered the act as a result of a conversation Wolfe had with Joe Melillo, executive producer at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He mentioned Bogart as a "quintessential Americanist" who might be able to create a show based on Wolfe's "Steel Hammer" music.

"It was a great matchup," said Wolfe, who had long been a fan of Bogart's theater work.

For the show, Bogart preserved Wolfe's music, adding text written by four playwrights.

The SITI Company performers deliver the text in "Steel Hammer" and also play wooden bones, the

mountain dulcimer and do step dancing, while Bang on the Can All-Stars and the three guest singers perform Wolfe's music.

"The text (written by four American playwrights) weaves in between the movement," Wolfe said. "It's a very natural flow. Sometimes there's no music, just speaking."

The show premiered last year at the Humana Festival of New Plays in Louisville, Ky., with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. There it was presented with taped music.

The production at Krannert Center will be the first with Wolfe's music performed live by Bang on the Can All-Stars, with the guest singers.

Wolfe co-founded Bang on the Can, the parent organization of the All-Stars ensemble, in 1992. She considers Bang on the Can her home base.

Wolfe describes the sextet as half-string quartet and rock band. The amplified chamber ensemble has been described as one of the country's most important vehicles for contemporary music.

Wolfe's Pulitzer Prize-winning concert-length oratorio, "Anthracite Fields," is for chorus and instruments. For it, she drew on oral histories, interviews and speeches to honor people who worked in the Pennsylvania Anthracite coal region. She grew up in that state but not in that region.

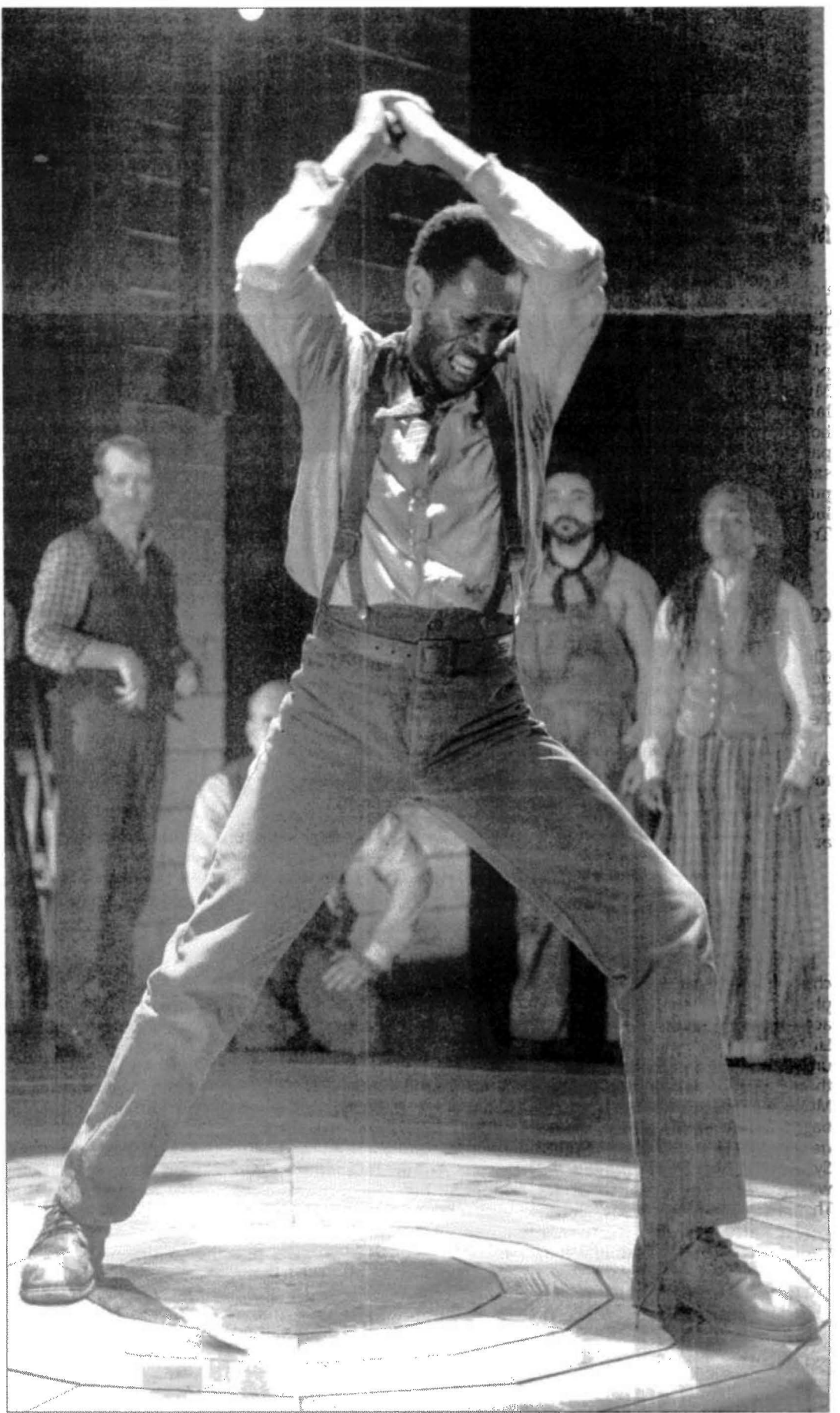
The Bang on the Can label Cantaloupe Music will release "Anthracite Fields" on CD and digitally this Friday.

Last year, the label released Wolfe's "Steel Hammer," featuring the Trio Mediaeval and the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Carnegie Hall and Maria and Robert A. Skirnick commissioned the "Steel Hammer" music, which was a finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize.

After Krannert Center, "Steel Hammer" will travel to four other venues, ending Dec. 2-6 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of its Next Wave Festival.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music and Krannert Center co-commisioned the dramatized stage production of "Steel Hammer"; SITI Company developed it at Krannert Center this past year.

Bogart, the artistic director of SITI Company, founded the company in 1992 with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki. The New York-based SITI Company, which has performed often at Krannert Center, tours extensively throughout the United States and internationally. It's dedicated to the creation of new work, the training of theater artists and to international collaborations.



Krannert Center for the Performing Arts
Eric Berryman portrays John Henry during a performance of 'Steel Hammer.'

If you go

What: "Steel Hammer," a stage show about folklore hero John Henry and man versus machine, with music by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Julia Wolfe and show directed by Anne Bogart, performed by SITI Company and the Bang on a Can All-Stars, with guest singers Emily Eagen, Katie Geissinger and Molly Quinn. The original text for the show was written by Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Colwell Playhouse, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, 500 S. Goodwin Ave., U

Tickets: \$34, adults; \$29, senior citizens; \$15, non-University of Illinois students; and \$10, UI students and youths.

Information: 333-6280 or krannertcenter.com

Note: A free talk-back follows the performance, with SITI Company and Bang on a Can All-Stars members.

Also: A panel discussion with Bogart and Wolfe about "Steel Hammer" will take place at 5:30 p.m. Thursday in Krannert's Studio Theatre, moderated by Krannert director Mike Ross.

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