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Review 'Steel Hammer' bangs out a spectacularly inventive social message at UCLA's Royce Hall

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Books chronicling the commonplace, such as the pencil or salt, have become a fashionable means for finding in the everyday clues to some of the grander developments in society. Meanwhile, microhistorians turn to such occurrences as a massacre of 20 artisans in a 16th-century French village to illuminate the grander sweep of history. For physicists, the smallest particles hold the greatest secrets of the workings of the universe.

"Steel Hammer," an extraordinarily potent collaboration between composer Julia Wolfe and director Anne Bogart given its West Coast premiere by UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance at Royce Hall on Friday night, might be taken as a music theater equivalent of this phenomenon. It concentrates on the folk song "John Henry" as a vehicle for examining large contemporary social issues: the African American experience, American labor history, our contemporary obsession with work and the forgetfulness of history.

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Although all of these are very big deals, the most telling one is the last. Art has the permission to go where scientists, historians, cultural commentators and journalists cannot. Wolfe and Bogart don't seek direct cause and effect. They accept the premise of unknowable as the basis for understanding.

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The legend of John Henry is myth based on real conditions and mainly transmitted through folk song. Perhaps there was an African American steel driver, unjustly imprisoned, who raced against a steam-powered hammer and won. Perhaps he loved Polly Ann — or Moly Ann or Julie Ann or Sary Ann or Mary Magdalena, as portrayed in different tellings of legend. He was said to be short; he was said to be tall. He was a cotton picker; he was a convict. He wielded a 9-pound hammer, a 20-pound hammer, two 20-pound hammers.

We know John Henry mainly from the songs. The most familiar are probably the versions sung by Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, Johnny Cash, Van Morrison and Bruce Springsteen. There have been through the decades many, many more. Each has a different spin, not only with a different John Henry but also a different use for John Henry.

What makes "Steel Hammer" so important, other than that it is spectacularly inventive and original music theater, is that Wolfe and Bogart recognize a composite John Henry. They know you cannot pin him down any more than quantum physicists can pin down the location of an electron. But the difference is that there are no equations to be discovered about probabilities about the time and location of John Henry. It is for that very reason that John Henry matters.

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The project began with Wolfe's 2009 "Steel Hammer," a cycle of eight songs written for the raucous Bang on a Can All-Stars. Through the combination of forceful, driving instrumental music, heavy on the metal, and three singers of sublime purity (Emily Eagen, Katie Geissinger and Molly Quinn at UCLA), Wolfe (a founding composer of Bang on a Can) hammered in a social message while at the same time realizing that nothing is real. The text of her first song — "Some say he's from" — is a fragment that sets the tone of the 70-minute score.

But compelling as her music is, it begs for embellishment. Bogart's solution was to create a kaleidoscopic theater with her SITI Company. The songs are framed around four short plays by Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor that examine John Henry from a variety of angles that relate to the present African American experience.

"I'm just a man," John Henry says at one point, "and you know how the story goes."

"We all walked the road together," the playwrights seem to say collectively. That there is a collective familiarity, though, doesn't translate to a collective practice or understanding.

And so John Henry becomes a torn, driven figure, a superman and an ordinary man, a man who takes control but who is also powerless. A warden says to John Henry that he has suffered injustice but that no individual can change the system. Yet it is for the very lack of specificity, the questions that have no answers, that allows his legend to inspire.

The six SITI performers, especially Eric Berryman as John Henry, are exceptional. They act, dance, tirelessly race around the stage and confront one another in myriad ways. They use their bodies as percussion instruments taking their cues from the All-Stars. They enter into claustrophobic formations and stomp their way out. There is a touchingly inconclusive scene between John Henry and Polly Ann (Patrice Johnson Chevannes).