

HYDE PARK HERALD

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A magnificent opera about a magnificent woman

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Joelle Lamarre as Harriet Tubman in "Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom."

-Spencer Bibbs

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During his final appearance at the White House press correspondents' dinner, Barack Obama joked that if his remarks went over well he could, in years to come, deliver them to Goldman Sachs and "earn some serious Tubmans." When the new Harriet Tubman 20-dollar-bill enters circulation it's likely that Obama's cheeky yet affectionate expression will as well.

Those who want to know more about Harriet Tubman can turn to a magnificent new opera that illuminates her career and artfully sketches a compelling picture of her life. "Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom" by composer Nkeiru Okoye is an example of American opera at its very best. The South Shore Opera Company of Chicago mounted the Chicago premiere the last Sunday in October.

The opera provides an intimate look at Harriet's life, beginning as a child (then known as Minty Ross) who, in spite of living in the crushing world of slavery, had the strength of spirit to find optimism in the fact that her family was allowed to stay together. We are given an intriguing peek into her life, seeing her hardworking and compassionate parents, the sister she fiercely loves, and John Tubman, the man she married but who gave her little more than the surname which became one of the most famous in the annals of abolitionism.

South Shore Opera deployed fine singers for "Harriet Tubman" starting with soprano Joelle Lamarre in the title role. She calibrated her performance to save her greatest strength for the end, the gripping aria, "I am Moses, the liberator," where she sang with guts and remarkable power.

Soprano Dana Campbell and tenor Henry Pleas were standouts not only for their singing, but their splendid acting. Campbell brought tenderness to the role of Harriet's sister, singing with attractive freshness. Pleas had gleaming sound and an engaging, upbeat sway in the opera's only joyful number. Tenor Cornelius V. Johnson III delivered abolitionist William Still's music with sermon-like fervor while Qiana McNary's pleasing mezzo-soprano provided warmth to the role of Harriet's mother. Baritone Brandon Brown's growling masculinity as John aptly explained Harriet's decision to marry him.

The music from the chamber ensemble in the pit was stirring and nuanced under the steady hand of Leslie B. Dunner, who also conducted the world premiere of the work in New York City in 2014. The supporting players and chorus offered firm vocal underpinning. The stage direction by Chuck Smith was uneven and at times even ragged but the force of the music was always present. The use of projected titles before each scene was a vital element in making the numerous and dizzying shifts in time and place understandable. The rest of the stage dressing looked as if it was hauled out of someone's garage at the last minute.

"Harriet Tubman" draws on an eclectic mix of genre music, including spirituals, jazz, blues, and ragtime. In 1893, Antonin Dvorák said that he believed the future of music in the U.S. — where he lived for two years — was to be found in the music of Black America. Okoye not only follows in the footsteps of great Black composers such as William Grant Still and Florence Price (who proved Dvorák right) but Aaron Copland and George Gershwin as well. She spins simple Americana into the gold of art music of lasting quality.

"Harriet Tubman: How I Crossed That Line to Freedom" demonstrates how an ordinary person can become extraordinary; it is an uplifting story of a real hero that unfolds with compelling detail and drama. The music is irresistible, invigorating, and vivid, building to an unforgettable and thrilling conclusion. It is a great American opera.