

PAUL MORSE PRODUCTIONS

Letters to Harriet Tubman

Art Form: Storytelling/Historical Character

Style: Traditional

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

Paul Morse (author, producer) was a composer, lyric writer and author of musical theatre works for the stage. A recipient of numerous awards for playwriting and musical theatre, his works have been produced both nationally and internationally. He participated actively in the production of theatre for youth projects and worked as an artist in residence at North Carolina A&T State University and the Theatre of Creativity. He was a writer, director and teacher for such organizations as Los Angeles Unified Schools, The L.A. Children's Museum, Performing Tree and Music Center Education Division. During the 1980s he wrote and produced ten plays and musicals which toured throughout Southern California. In 1986, *Children of the Universe* had an international premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland. *Letters to Harriet Tubman*, his most popular work, was performed in Washington D.C., with Mr. Morse playing the role of Jeffrey.

Since the death of Mr. Morse, Paul Morse Productions has continued to present the compelling, dynamic performances for young audiences for which Paul was known.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Letters to Harriet Tubman is a series of vignettes highlighting the contributions of "the General"- the nickname fondly bestowed on Miss Harriet Tubman by her close friend, the famous abolitionist John Brown. Based on historical incidents and written with meticulous attention to authenticity, the performance casts the audience as participants: they play "visitors." The time is 1902; the location is Auburn, New York, and the audience is sitting on the front porch of Harriet Tubman. Ms. Tubman, now 80 years old, is entertaining a group of visitors as she reminisces about the heroic adventures of her life. Students learn about the events and politics of the era as Ms. Tubman, helped by her neighbor, Jeffrey Taylor, sing songs and recount stories of slavery, civil war and the struggle for freedom.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Harriet Ross Tubman was born into slavery in 1821. Her parents, Benjamin Ross and Harriet Green, named her Araminta, but she later changed her name to Harriet. She was one of ten children, several of whom were taken away in chains and sold to other plantation masters. A quiet and intelligent child, Harriet's parents hoped that she would learn house chores to avoid the backbreaking work in the fields.

However, Harriet's greatest desire was to work outdoors: her father had schooled her in the lore of the forests and rivers, the night stars and how to find herbs and berries for food and medicine. She was set to work watching muskrat traps. She hated to see the creatures caught, but she loved working the river. Working out of doors, she developed great physical strength and added to her knowledge of signs in nature. Her hope was that one day her skills would help her gain her freedom.

In 1844 Harriet married a free black, John Tubman. She loved him dearly, but couldn't give up her lifelong dream of freedom for herself and her people. From early childhood she had heard of slave revolts and escapes through the routes that led North, called the "Underground Railroad." After five years of marriage, Harriet decided to run away, but could not convince her husband to join her. Three of her brothers started out with her, but, fearful of capture, returned to their masters. Harriet continued alone.

On her path, Harriet met a slave named Jim, who told her of a white Quaker woman who could help her; this was her introduction to the Underground Railroad. Harriet led many hazardous journeys, returning to the South 19 times over 10 years to guide more than 300 slaves to freedom in the Northern states and Canada. She was sometimes forced to use stern measures with some who became fearful of continuing the journey, an action that could put the entire group of travelers at risk.

In 1857, she returned to the Maryland plantation where she was born and rescued her parents from slavery. She settled with them in a small home in Auburn, New York, and continued living there with her second husband after the death of her parents. Harriet Tubman died in 1913, leaving behind a legacy of generosity, courage and vision. Her life was often in jeopardy, and the price for her capture increased throughout her lifetime, but she never quit working against slavery. She may have been born into slavery, but she died free.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Think about the letters and songs you listened to in the performance. Which was your favorite? Why?
- Have you ever heard of Harriet Tubman? What did you already know about her? What did you learn that was new information?
- Discuss what it must have been like for the men, women and children who followed Harriet on the Underground Railroad. What were their goals? What were the consequences if they failed?
- Harriet Tubman never learned to read or write, but she had many skills that helped her succeed in her aims of gaining freedom for her people. List and discuss the talents that helped her succeed.

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

The Underground Railroad was a secret network of land and sea routes over which blacks had to travel to reach the Northern States and Canada. There were hundreds of "stations" in towns and cities of the Confederate border states. Travelers would begin with the name of one person or place; after arriving at that place or contacting that person they would receive directions to the next "station." Slowly, step by step, they traveled north in secret. The Railroad included the East and Midwest, and was a major source of harassment to slave owners.

Using classroom, library or internet resources, research and discuss the routes of travel for the Underground Railroad. Plot the routes on a map, listing the dangers in each pathway. Were there towns and mountains to avoid? Rivers to cross? How many miles did the escaping slaves have to travel before they were safe? Research and discuss how the travelers ate, slept and moved north in secret. Research the consequences for slaves who were captured and returned to their "owners."

Legend:

- ☉ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ Discuss how the presentation of Harriet Tubman's life and adventures reflected the time and place in which she lived. Discuss or list the events, lyrics or melodies seemed to transport you to that time period.
- ❖ Divide the class into two groups, asking them to imagine what it would be like to consider following the "General" to freedom in the North. Ask one group to make a list of reasons to go, and the other a list of reasons to stay. Partner students from opposite groups and ask them to practice discussing their "points of view." Students can invent a relationship between their characters (mother and child, siblings, friends, etc.) and a compelling reason why they must leave (or stay) as soon as possible. (being sold to another plantation, being punished, etc.) Students should rehearse and present their discussion to the class. Students may alternate roles so they each experience both points of view. Discuss the "conversations" with the class.
- ▶ Ask students to pretend to be a newspaper reporter from Harriet Tubman's time. They should make a list of questions to be used in interviewing her. They should be sure to include references to historical events (the Civil War, Harper's Ferry, Fugitive Slave Law, Abolition) and people (John Brown, Frederick Douglass, William Seward.)

* Owners made it very difficult for slaves to escape, keeping them illiterate and unaware of the basic geography of the land around them. Some owners even tried to keep them from knowing which direction was north! Slaves who yearned for freedom couldn't be stopped, however; they found many ways to overcome these handicaps. Directions north were passed from plantation to plantation, often through songs (Follow the Drinking Gourd, which refers to the Big Dipper, the constellation that many followed on their journey north) or specially designed quilts (which were actually maps.) Thinking about the need for secrecy and the consequences if they were caught, what other ways do you think the slaves may have passed information? Make a list of the real and presumed methods, and compare them to methods of secret communication used by other cultures.



BIBLIOGRAPHY/WEBLINKS:

Clinton, Catherine, Harriet Tubman: *The Road to Freedom*. Little Brown & Co., 2004.

On the World Wide Web:

www.nyhistory.com/harriet Tubman/life.htm

www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/