

STUDY GUIDE FOR MIXED MAGIC THEATRE'S EXULT CHOIR
PERFORMANCE OF

EXODUS

THE SONGS THAT HELPED A PEOPLE FREE THEMSELVES
FROM SLAVERY IN AMERICA



Mixed Magic Theatre is a non-profit theater and performance venue at Lorraine Mills in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Mixed Magic Theatre was founded in 2000 by Bernadet and Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. It was originally located in North Kingstown, Rhode Island. The theatre relocated to Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 2005. In 2007, Mixed Magic officially altered its mission to "bring diverse stories to the stage." The theatre added an outdoor amphitheater in 2017.

In addition to producing plays, the theatre acts as a venue for local and national performers. Mixed Magic also produces a set of regular programs, including Rise To Black, a theater series featuring works from black artists and the Exult Choir, the theatre's resident choir, formed in 2006.

The theatre has attracted international attention for producing *Moby Dick: Then and Now* by Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, an interpretation of Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*. The play traveled to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and the

International Melville Conference held by the Melville Society in Poland in 2007.

The Mixed Magic Exult Choir, under the direction of Kimberly Morrison Pitts-Wiley, was formed in 2006 to preserve the history and character of gospel music, an original American art form. Although gospel music is performed all over the world today, its foundation is deeply rooted in the 300 years of African peoples in enslavement in America. This great music melded together African rhythms with the newly learned English language as an expression of a people's effort to hold fast to their humanity, as well as their hopes and dreams of freedom from bondage and suffering.

Pre-show questions to ask students:

1. Why is it important to sing historic gospel songs today?
2. Why is gospel music and the stories behind it an important part of American history?
3. How does music celebrate and transform the human spirit?
4. Gospel music is performed by choirs around the world in countries including South Africa, Japan and South Korea. What other countries can you name that have gospel groups?

Post-show questions to ask students:

1. Could you hear the struggle or the celebration of the people in the music?
2. What do you think makes the music "gospel music"?
3. What was your favorite song performed and why?
4. Do you think there may have been messages in the music for people who were traveling through the underground railroad, trying to reach freedom?



The Mixed Magic Exult Choir in Concert

The Songs That Helped a People Liberate Themselves

For many years, it has been taught as a part of American History that President Abraham Lincoln “freed the slaves.” While it is true Lincoln fought for and was able to pass the Emancipation Proclamation, this action alone did not by itself allow black people enslaved in America to escape their bondage. That would prove to be a long process and take

the collective efforts of the enslaved and people of goodwill to bring an end to this long national nightmare.

While this study guide will focus on some of the songs and music that were used to free many from captivity, it cannot or will not tell the whole story. This author encourages teachers to seek out and examine the whole story of slavery in America. It is a story of conflicting ideas and of faith and the power of the human spirit.

A Brief Look at the Beginning of Slavery in America

It is difficult to know the exact date and place Africans first appeared on the shores of North America. But over a 300-year period, hundreds of thousands of Africans became a key part of the establishment and survival of colonies in the Americas and the New World. However, many consider a significant starting point to slavery in America to be 1619, when the privateer, The White Lion, brought 20 captive Africans ashore in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. The crew had seized the Africans from the Portuguese slave ship Sao Jao Bautista.

Throughout the 17th century, European settlers in North America turned to enslaved Africans as a cheaper, more plentiful labor source than indentured servants, who were mostly poor Europeans.

Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million enslaved people were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone.

It is believed by many that the men and women stolen from their homelands in Africa accepted their fate and did not resist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There were hundreds of revolts and other efforts by the African people to be free and return to their homeland.

One of those tools used in the enslaved people's efforts to escape bondage was the use of music, new drums, and coded language.

But there were obstacles to overcome for this music to emerge. When the stolen Africans arrived on America's shores, they were very often from different villages and tribal groups with different languages and beliefs and traditions. The people first had to learn how to talk to each other while at the same time learning to communicate with their capturers. A major factor in this learning process was through the indoctrination of the Africans to Christianity and its promise of liberation and spiritual salvation.

Another key component to communication was the reinvention of the drums. Almost every culture in the world uses drums as a means of communication, commemoration, and celebration. So, when the drums were taken away from the Africans, they had to find new ways to recreate them. They did this primarily using hand claps, foot stomps and the rhythms of labor which included the sounds of tools and the human voice. These devices not only made the work easier but became the foundation for developing plans to escape to freedom. In later years these sounds would be the source for jazz, blues, rock and roll, the Negro Spirituals and gospel music.

It was also a form of coded language that often took Biblical figures and teachings and turned them over to disguise its messages of revolt or escape to freedom in the North.

Songs of the Underground Railroad

Spirituals, hymns and work songs were used to encourage the heart and convey coded information as to when, where, and how to escape, and warned of dangers and obstacles along the route.

A few examples of this coded messaging songs include:

Follow the Drinkin' Gourd

Conductors on the Underground Railroad would hang gourds on their doorways as a sign for those escaping slavery that the house was a safe haven.

The song's title is said to refer to the star formation known in America as the Big Dipper and in Europe as The Plough. The pointer stars of the Big Dipper align with the North Star. In this song the repeated line "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" is thus often interpreted as instructions to escaping slaves to travel north by following the North Star, leading them to the northern states, Canada, and freedom. The song ostensibly encodes escape instructions and a map from Mobile, Alabama, up the Tombigbee River, over the divide to the Tennessee River, then downriver to where the Tennessee and Ohio rivers meet in Paducah, Kentucky.

Follow the drinking gourd

For the old man is coming

To carry you to freedom

So follow the drinking gourd

Go Down Moses

A spiritual that depicts the biblical story of Moses in Exodus leading his people to freedom is believed by some to be a coded reference to the conductors on the Underground Railroad. The oppressor in the song is the pharaoh, but in real life would have been the slave owner.

Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land

Tell ole' Pharoah to let my people go

Steal Away

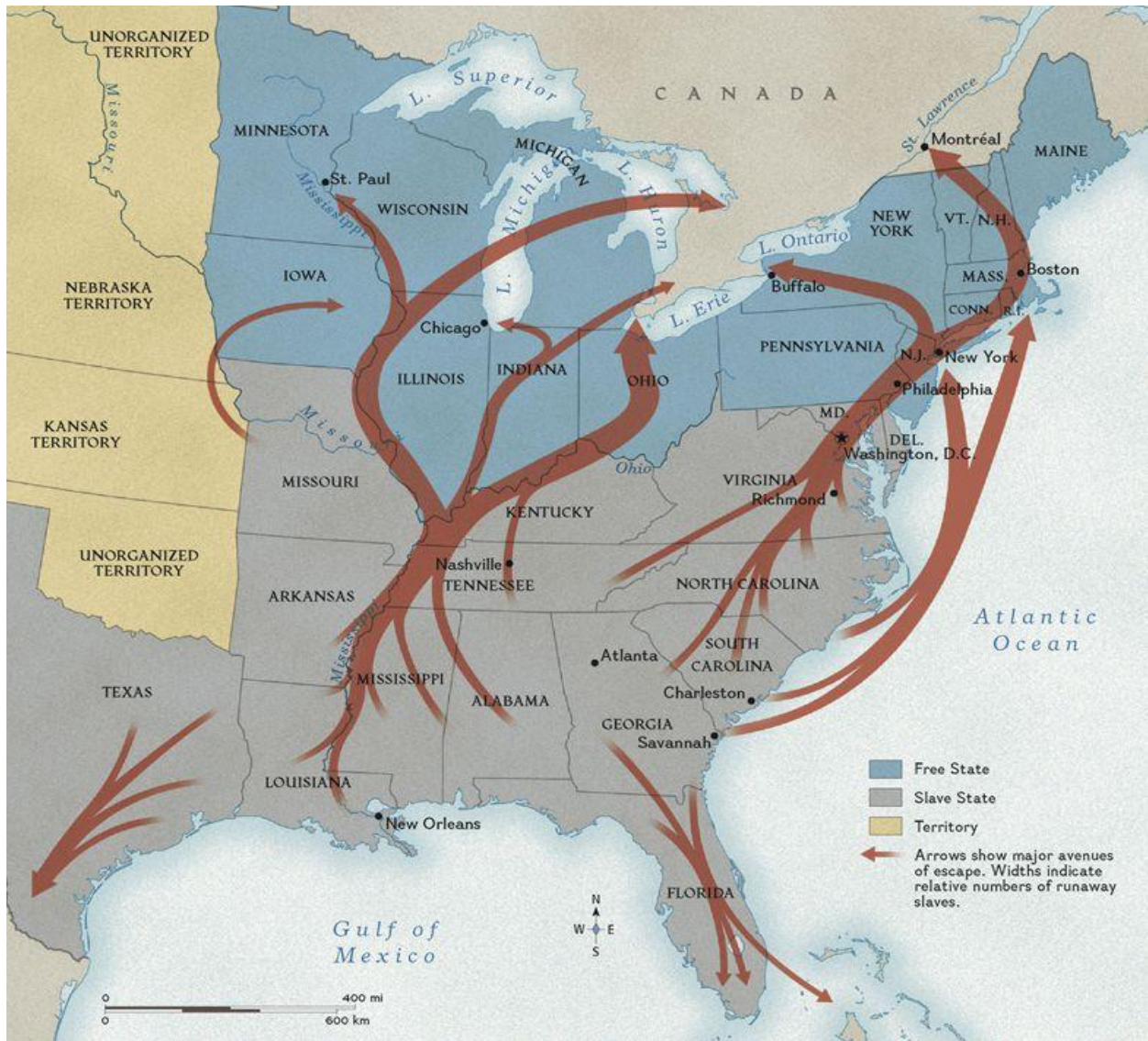
As it was illegal in most slave states to teach slaves to read or write, songs were used to communicate messages and directions about when, where, and how to escape, and warned of dangers and obstacles along the route. The instructions on what to do and when to do it were the message in the song's lyrics.

*Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home
I hain't got long to stay here*

Oh Freedom

This song was not a longing for death as much as it was a pledge to defy slavery.

*Oh freedom, Oh freedom
Oh freedom over me
And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free*



A MAP OF UNDERGROUND RAILROAD ESCAPE ROUTES

Links to Videos of Notable Gospel Greats

Mahalia Jackson

<https://youtu.be/ZJg5Op5W7yw>

The Fisk Jubilee Singers

<https://youtu.be/Wo0AOf9b6fU>

Shirley Caesar

<https://youtu.be/MKMqDLD2CI0>

Thomas A. Dorsey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HNZNvlhIN4>

The Blind Boys of Alabama

<https://youtu.be/baje6r60do4?list=RDEMVjTHrF7inpDW7GO-37TGsw>

The Dixie Hummingbirds

<https://youtu.be/O80H83fwSCs?list=RDEMVySv6habOglwSWbgzTNR9w>

Other Gospel Artists to Research

Albertina Walker

Rev. James Cleveland

Aretha Franklin

Clara Ward

Sister Rosetta Tharpe

The Clarke Sisters

Edwin Hawkins

Andre Crouch

Yolanda Adams

Donnie McClurkin

Sallie Martin