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"Invisible Wings," an evocation of slave history, at Jacob's Pillow.

Hope and Sanctuary On a Torturous Journey

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Night is falling quickly over the forest and the rough footpath that winds through it. Drums beat in the distance. The shrill baying of dogs grows louder and more distant. There is the smell of something burning. Then around one twist of the path a man is revealed, sitting motionless on a rock. Moments later another man races through the woods, his neck encased in an iron collar crowned with jangling bells. A dirt road gleams ahead. Down the road a woman in a long white dress darts out from a hiding place and into the woods again.

These are the opening moments of Joanna Haigood's "Invisible Wings" as experienced by the audience threading through unyielding woods at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in the Berkshires, where the piece was created and where it received its festival premiere on Tuesday. A dazzlingly rich, ambitious evocation of mid-19th-century black American slave culture and history, "Invisible Wings" plunges late-20th-century viewers into the world of the slaves who ran from their masters and traveled north to freedom, often alone or carrying children, along a clandestine network of sanctuaries known as the Underground Railroad.

Several splinter routes crisscrossed the Berkshires. One sanctuary was on festival grounds. The "station master," as those who provided food, clothes and shelter were known, was Stephen Carter, a farmer and community leader known as a "violent abolitionist."

"Invisible Wings" is the product of three years of exhaustive research by Ms. Haigood, a San Francisco-based choreographer, and Linda Tillery, a composer, singer and musicologist. It is a triumph for Ms. Haigood and her collaborators, who also included the storyteller Diane Ferlatte, the performers of Ms. Haigood's Zacco Dance Theater and Ms. Tillery's Cultural Heritage Choir, performers from the area, a first-rate design and technical team, and the young festival staff members who unobtrusively helped to guide the piece along.

Ms. Ferlatte gave names to the mostly anonymous fleeing slaves in stories she told from atop a boulder at the entrance to the woods and later in the Carter family barn and a small clearing that served as the main set. Midway through the piece there was a stop at a market where slave women sold fruit, brooms and rags and gossiped with sly humor through the old songs they sang. In the final, three-tiered setting, Ms. Haigood created a plantation, sanctuaries and escape routes that included an imaginary river across the barn roof forded by slaves "following the drinking gourd," or Big Dipper, in the sky.

As these latter-day slaves sang the song, a single star suddenly became clear (as well as the lights of two distant planes). On a makeshift platform below, an elegant black Juba dancer (Robert Henry Johnson) and a clumsy, mocking "Jim Crow" (Jules Beckman) in music-hall blackface took turns in period dances to make shockingly clear, just as it seemed there was no more room for horror, the wanton brutality and ignorance of white attitudes toward blacks.

Ms. Haigood makes her points quietly and un sentimentally, evenhandedly celebrating the men, women and children who fled and those who helped them to escape. One is even able to feel the faintest touch of sympathy for the slave master's sour wife, who sees her husband's attraction to a slave woman and takes out her rage on the barn walls and floor, slashing at them endlessly in a remarkable solo with a bullwhip.

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with a story about the trickster High John the Conqueror, who lifts them up in their weariest moments. Her tale of Old Toby, who helps himself and other slaves to step into the air and soar away from the plantation fields, prepares one for the culminating image in "Invisible Wings."

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Ms. Ferlatte's voice rises to the sky. Behind her on the smoky platform, where a fire has been built, other voices rise in the sweet harmony of true believers in the song "I'll Fly Away." Then, high above the barn roof, a slave woman floats into view and slowly on into the night sky, her long white skirts lapping gently about her flying body.

"Invisible Wings" is sometimes confusing in the way it moves back and forth in time, and the pace flags occasionally. But the piece is filled with magical stagecraft. It is a remarkable distillation of material. It is also an unpreachy, vivid history lesson, complete with live horse and bumping buggy.

"I Speak in the name of the black millions," Langston Hughes writes in a poem in the printed program. "Let all others keep silent for a moment." Slaves speak in "Invisible Wings" in commentaries and writing from the mid-19th century that are included in the program, a facsimile newspaper of the time with historical background, charts and period illustrations and a list of books on the history for adults and children. The faces of slaves and of Carter and his family stare out of photographs in an archival exhibition in the Carter home. Ms. Haigood has given the rest of us the chance to be silent and to listen, see and learn. New York Times