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Freedom Bound in Forest Dance

By GIA KOURLAS

Joanna Haigood is obsessed with the notion of memory and place, and being the site artist she is, she digs deeper than most to expose their roots. But none of her works have meant as much to her as “Invisible Wings,” last performed at Jacob’s Pillow in 1998 and being revived this week as part of that dance festival’s 75th-anniversary season.



The ambitious performance piece, which lasts about two hours and literally takes audiences on a quarter-mile journey through the woods, tells a story of slave culture inspired by the Pillow’s history. “I was looking through stacks of books and brochures, and I came across a pamphlet,” Ms. Haigood recalled. “At the very bottom of it was a line that said the Pillow had been a station on the Underground Railroad. A light went off. I realized at that moment that this was work that I was meant to do.”

Ms. Haigood, who is fond of aerial work, has created many transformative site-specific productions over the years that also include elements of history, among them “Picture Red Hook,” a piece from 2002 performed at a grain terminal in Brooklyn.

For “Invisible Wings” Ms. Haigood, 50, an African-American artist based in San Francisco, embarked on three years of research, which included compiling a genealogy study of the Carter family, which owned the Jacob’s Pillow farm before the dance pioneer Ted Shawn bought it in 1931 and turned it into the site of the festival. Stephen Woodward Carter, probably assisted by his son George, used the farm as a station before the Civil War. Slaves were transported from Connecticut on hay wagons, slept in the barn — now the Pillow’s store — and then made their way father north.

“The Underground Railroad was a secret network,” she said. “There were so many people — farmers and schoolteachers — who participated in this movement and who will never be named. The Carters were among that group of average citizens, and they were extraordinary in their commitment to bringing down slavery.”

The performance seamlessly weaves movement, performed by Ms. Haigood’s Zaccho Dance Theater, with African-American storytelling by Diane Ferlatte and 19th-century slave songs compiled by the musician Linda Tillery, two other Bay Area artists. There is a story, loosely told, in which Mary, a runaway slave (played by Ms. Haigood), ends up at the Carters’ house. While sleeping in the barn, she relives the events that prompted her to flee.

While the restaging adheres to the original story, it will incorporate new songs and dances, including a buck dance, a precursor to tap. “Often you would see someone get on a box and dance and collect money,” Ms. Haigood explained. “It happened in a market square.” For inspiration she used a [Thomas Edison](#) film of a small black child on a box performing a lively buck dance surrounded by a group of clapping white men.

“At the time of slavery there were a lot of competitions,” she continued. “Dance was really important, and often plantation owners would take slaves who had a strong facility for dance. They would compete against other plantations. There is a competition in the center of the piece, but I thought it would be great to start with a smaller reference of what would have been common in the marketplace, to get a sense of how the ‘entertainer’ was developed.”

Taken as a whole the production is intended to be a visceral experience, full of frightening moments like the sight of a man wearing an iron neck shackle with bells and the sound of a bullwhip. But for Ms. Haigood the most harrowing scene comes when Mary is separated from her mother on an auction block. “We’re holding on to each other and being pulled apart,” she said.

“Imagining what that must have been like to go through over and over again is completely devastating. Even talking about it makes me want to cry.”

In restaging “Invisible Wings” Ms. Haigood has tightened sections, chosen a different route for the audience (up to 200 people a show) and planned more time in the forest.

“All of the landscape here is magical, but the longer we can stay in the woods the better,” she said. “My objective in taking people into an area that they aren’t familiar with is to transport them. I want them to be reasonably disoriented by the time they come out at the other end. They’re not exactly voyeurs. They’re participants.”

The title is a metaphor for freedom, but it also underscores Ms. Haigood's expertise in aerial work: dancers, with the help of harnesses and trusses, fly through the sky. "At the end of the show we tell the story about how some slaves believed that others actually stepped on the air and flew away," she said. "Often when we think about being free, we think about flying." She laughed. "And you know how I like to be up in the air. I'm still trying to find my invisible wings, but I'm having a great time on the search."