



EDINBURGH 2019: HENRY BOX BROWN Q&A

by [Natalie O'Donoghue](#) Jun. 24, 2019

[Tweet Share](#)



BWW catches up with writer and co-composer Mehr Mansuri to chat about bringing Henry Box Brown back to the 2019 Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Tell us a bit about Henry Box Brown.

Henry Box Brown lived a life of mythological proportions. The production tells his story - an 1850s enslaved Virginia man, who shipped himself to freedom in a 2ftx3ft dry goods box. Henry was not only an abolitionist, but a performer, a musician and published author. Henry worked in a Richmond tobacco factory but resolved to escape in 1848 when his pregnant wife and three children were sold and

shipped away. Henry became a well-known speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society and sold 8,000 copies of the narrative he wrote about his life. He then adapted it into a stage show. However, he was targeted as a fugitive slave and escaped to the UK to find true freedom. In 1850 Henry arrived in Liverpool and mounted his one-man show across the country, including Kirkcaldy. Ultimately, we did not set out to write a musical about slavery. Henry's life was surrounded by music, a rich oral tradition which he perfected in his speaking tours in the US and his "escape act" and the re-enactment of his journey through music and storytelling. All the elements of a musical story were already there for us. And since he came to Scotland with something very like a Fringe show we think it's only right that we should perform here again - 169 years later.

Why is this an important story to tell?

As we pieced together Henry's story, **we noticed a common theme of sacrifice by unlikely people from unlikely places.** From the white gambler who was jailed after helping Henry and many more fugitive slaves escape to freedom, to the Scots who fought and died to end slavery in the American Civil War. Henry's story is important because we are living in times where, more than ever, we need true stories of selfless sacrifice to evoke empathy and provoke positive action. Artistically, we also wanted to pay homage to the thousands of enslaved songwriters from **whose soulful chants our musical was born and built.** They created this music by any means they could - songs of triumph, joys, sorrows. **We have excavated these treasures and placed each song in its most authentic setting - an American musical.**

Do you think the themes are particularly relevant today?

We have resurrected the inner life of people who lived 200 years ago to tell truths about the past and to reclaim lost lives by recognising their struggles in our own damaged present. We hope audiences identify with Henry's **struggle under the weight of psychological and physical injuries** and how he maintained his dignity, his identity, his honour and inherent nobility. But Henry is not the only one seeking freedom. **His white counterparts are also seeking their freedom - a freedom of conscience.** Finally, as a British schooled US citizen who escaped my native Iran due to religious persecution as a member of the Baha'I Faith, the largest non-Islamic minority religion in Iran, I was struck by the theme of family displacement and the generational damage that continues to plague African American communities in the US.

Why bring it back to Edinburgh?

Henry was persecuted in America and found refuge on your shores. As we confront one of the most challenging times of our lives in the US, **where racism and racist attitudes are all but sanctioned at the highest level**, we also find ourselves taking refuge on your shores - at coming to the Fringe Festival offers a profound means of truth-telling.

Who do you think should come and see it?

Anyone who has a child, or has a parent, or who never knew their birth parents.

<https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on/henry-box-brown>

<https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on/henry-box-brown>