

assembly
Edinburgh Festival Fringe | 1 - 27 AUG 2018

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MARK STEEL EVERY LITTLE THING'S GO
ASSEMBLY ROOMS - BALLROOM
HAPPY KROKOPANDI - MISTRESS AND MISFET
ALEX SALMOND - UNLEASHED, 13th-27th @
LITTLE BLUE

TOP REVIEWED SHOWS

Henry Box Brown: The Musical - Journey to Freedom.
4 August 2018
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“...US history is full of remarkable and heroic African Americans but even today we hear precious little about them... never before presented on a theatrical stage ...”

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Henry Box Brown: The Musical - Journey To Freedom.

4 August 2018



Interview with Mehr Mansuri, writer of Henry Box Brown

Imagine being bought and sold – forced to work on a plantation or in a factory for no pay because you were the wrong colour.

This was reality for millions of 19th-century African Americans in a country that loved to depict itself as the land of liberty.

Among them was Henry Box Brown who returned one day returned from labouring in a tobacco factory to find his wife and children had been sold.

The story that followed was quite astonishing, and one that intrigued me so much that I have turned it into a musical featuring some of New York's finest gospel singers and am bringing it to the Edinburgh Fringe.

Brown refused to take any more – he would accept incredible danger and escape.

He enlisted the help of a white reverend and a slave-owning gambler, had himself packed into a box 3ft by 2ft, and was shipped 300 miles to freedom by boat and train.

Brown's story became internationally famous in the 1840s and 1850s and he went on to become a prominent abolitionist, an author and entertainer – quite a guy and quite a life.

And that's the point. US history is full of remarkable and heroic African Americans but even today we hear precious little about them, and they are at their rarest in musicals.

Having spent many years living and working in America – making theatre in schools and communities in some of the poorer parts of New York and mostly African American youth and children – I decided I wanted to do something about it and create a musical with an African American at its very heart.

I found a wealth of support for this idea and we were able to put together a remarkable team for the creation of *Henry Box Brown: a musical journey*.

It's directed by Tony Award winner Ben Harney (*Broadway's Dream Girls*), and co-composed by Frank Sanchez (and myself) with the orchestration and score by Oscar nominee Jack Lenz – Best Original Score (*Mel Gibson's Passion of Christ*).

But something that makes it particularly special are the “a capella” spirituals arranged by Co- Music Directors, Eric Dozier and Renee Reid. Indeed this production might be called a ‘revival’ if you want to get technical. While we thoroughly enjoy the original songs in the show, it is these indigenous songs that have been masterfully revived into a tapestry of medleys - never before presented on a theatrical stage ... on any kind of stage (*except perhaps that dank halls of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s led by Martin Luther King Jr*).

The result is a *Les Miserables* set in America, and where the heroes and villains are not so clear cut. It's also a truly uplifting show about the human capacity to transcend – something you can glimpse from the trailer.

Bringing the show to Edinburgh is something important for me as Scotland and the rest of the UK played prominent roles in slavery and its abolition.

And Britain has often been a place of refuge for the persecuted.

As members of the Baha'i faith, Iran's largest non-Islamic religious minority, my family were forced to flee its homeland after the Islamic revolution. I was educated in Worcester before moving to the USA where I attended university.

After Henry Box Brown made his escape American laws on hunting down fugitive slaves were toughened and he was once again at risk. Like my family he was able to outrun injustice by coming to this country. (But that is where the comparison ends.)

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