

# The crate escape

As the Edinburgh Festival Fringe begins, *Philip Halcrow* talks with the team behind a musical that tells the inspiring true story of a slave who made a bid for freedom by packing himself in a box



Paul Gee as Henry Box Brown

**UNUSUAL and provocative performances are waiting in the wings of the Scottish capital. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which describes itself as having been 'defying the norm since 1947', officially begins on Friday (2 August).**

In previous years, shows have included Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* re-enacted by marionettes; *Cathy*, a reflection on homelessness performed by a company that creates 'theatre with and for homeless people'; and *Come Look at the Baby*, which simply featured a baby sitting on a granny's lap for half an hour. But it is unlikely that anything in Edinburgh will be more dramatic or outlandish than the real-life events portrayed in the musical *Henry Box Brown*.

In the middle of the 19th century an American slave escaped to freedom by climbing into a wooden box and mailing himself across the country – an event that he later recreated when he

gave lectures in Scotland and other parts of the UK.

'I like to joke,' says the musical's writer Mehr Mansuri, 'that Henry was the original Fringe performer. He had a sort of escape act and he was telling people the truth about slavery.'

Mehr describes *Henry Box Brown* as 'an after-school musical that became a professionally produced drama for

## *Their history is full of music and heroes*

adults'. Presented at the Fringe by CTC New York Ensemble, it grew out of Mehr's work with the Children's Theater Company.

'It's a company centred on moral and spiritual issues,' explains Mehr. 'We create musicals about ethical matters, such as human rights, the environment, disabilities and the status of women.'

Working with children – many of them African-American – and seeing them grow up, Mehr says she 'found a bizarre disconnect of African-American history from American history'.

She says: 'I wasn't sure where to find a way to get the kids to connect to their own history. I looked for musicals that would tell their story, which is full of music and heroes. But I couldn't find anything.'

'Then I went to a children's book fair and found a story called *Henry's Freedom Box*. I thought if it was good enough for a children's book, then we could address the taboo of slavery.'

'It was important for us not to re-enact slavery. We were not interested in the graphics of it – not because we wanted to sugar-coat it, but because we wanted the children to see themselves as voices for positive change.'

So Mehr wrote the musical. But then

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the appearance of two Tony award-winners on the scene meant that the story went further.

‘When the singer and actor Hinton Battle heard the songs for *Henry Box Brown* he said: “This is not for kids – you should do this for everybody, and I’ll help you.” He brought in Ben Harney, who won a Best Actor Tony for his role in the original Broadway production of *Dreamgirls*.

‘We spent two years workshoping the show at the Baha’i Unity Center and then when Mr Harney and Hinton Battle saw its potential in our 200-seat theatre, they said we were going to do it for thousands of people at the Christian Cultural Center.

‘This has been an interfaith programme,’ says Mehr, who left Iran, her country of birth, because of persecution of the Baha’i religious minority. ‘The Baha’i Unity Center aligns itself with the idea of looking at spirituality through theatre. And our link with the Christian Cultural Center brought the endorsement of African-American communities, who could see that we weren’t sugar-coating the story and that we were keeping to the subject of faith.’

Faith plays a major role in the drama. Henry was a member of his church choir and made his escape with the help of a white churchman.



**Co-director Najee Brown**

Co-director Najee Brown says: ‘The Bible describes faith as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Henry had to believe in his freedom before he could experience it. He had to have faith in the possibility of freedom in order to make his journey.’

Paul Gee, who plays Henry, believes that ‘faith is the point of the show. Henry had lost his mother and brother and sisters and then lost his wife and

**One day all this suffering would be taken away**

children. Where else was he going to turn other than God? His faith pushes him to creativity. It pushes him to say that he’s going to get himself out of his situation by mailing himself in a box.

‘Henry’s faith in God helped him to persevere. We can see it in his prayers and in his songs to God.’

There are some newly composed songs in the show. ‘And they’re great,’ Mehr says, ‘but the show-stoppers are the spirituals.’

The old spirituals naturally fitted into the drama.

Mehr explains: ‘Henry’s life was music – not only his life, but the life of the entire slave population. The music, chanting and singing were part of their culture – I did not have to contrive anything to include it. It’s another reason I’m amazed no one on Broadway has given homage to this rare collection of American music, which arguably is the root of all kinds of music.’

Najee highlights one song.

“Hold on Just a Little While Longer” was written by people who were going through tough times,’ he says. ‘The message they spread to each other was a message of God, a message of love, that one day all this suffering would be taken away. It’s the idea of Heaven. Their message still speaks to us today. They wrote



**Writer Mehr Mansuri**

those songs so that when we’re going through tough times, we can get through too.’

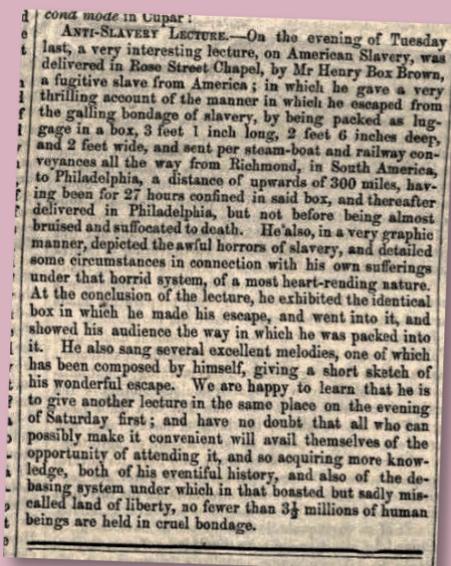
The song arrives as part of a medley at a pivotal part of the drama. It is an important moment – and not only for Henry.

Paul says: ‘The reverend has come to accept that he is going to help Henry and that he can no longer go on preaching in a way that could let people continue thinking slavery was right. His white congregation are in uproar and the black slaves don’t know what to

expect. But Henry steps forward and tells everyone to “hold on just a little while longer”.

‘At that moment Henry inspires the room, he inspires the other slaves, he inspires the reverend to help and he inspires himself to finish the work that he is supposed to do – to get free.’

Mehr explains that when she wrote the play, she wanted to ‘find what freedom meant



**An 1852 ‘Fife Herald’ report on a lecture given by Henry Box Brown**

to both races in the story’.

She says: ‘In the case of Henry, it was freedom from bondage and all the emotional torture that he and his family went through. But for the white characters who helped him and helped other fugitive slaves, it was freedom of conscience.

‘White folks who helped slaves paid a price. They had their homes burnt down. One did six years of jail time. The reverend in the play faces losing his congregation and livelihood with the potential for having his family attacked.

‘When I was creating the script, I was struck by the power of sacrifice and the freedom of conscience that people found.’

Mehr, Paul and Najee insist that the play’s themes have something to say today. It’s why performances

**We’re asking how we can turn our empathy into positive action**

are followed by discussions with the audiences, who are invited to take away a pledge card and commit themselves to a social action.

‘Art,’ says Najee, ‘should stir the heart for change, educate the mind and motivate the will. I’m hoping that through what we do, people will go out and try to make a difference. That’s why we give out the pledge card.

‘We want people to take action, even if it’s calling their mom and saying: “I love you, I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate you more.” Seeing Henry taken away from his family makes me appreciate my mother more. We take for granted the little things that Henry wasn’t allowed to take for granted.’

Mehr says: ‘Through the play we’re not only looking at Henry’s life and faith, but we’re asking how we can turn our empathy into positive action. We’re not just resurrecting the lives of people 200 years ago. We aim to reclaim the power of those lives and their struggles and to bring about healing today.’

- **Henry Box Brown is at the Gilded Balloon Patter Hoose – Big Yin from 31 July to 26 August**



**Paul Gee says faith helped Henry to persevere**