

Telling a Tale of Hope

The audience is gathered, the stage set. All around the room, large three-dimensional sets painted with lifelike scenes stand ready to tell their story. Next to the piano and drums, the musicians take position, their instruments waiting to sound the story. Backstage the dancers, singers and narrators, dressed in grand style, prepare to dance the story. At the front, the *griot*, an African historian in charge of the customs and traditions of his tribe, appears pensive. At last the cue is given — the *griot* steps up to the microphone and the story begins.

What is the story? It is *The African American Tale*, performed by a group of Los Angeles-based members. For three years the show has been performed more than 20 times at SGI-USA community centers, local schools and community associations, gaining widespread praise. This afternoon's performance commemorates Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Appropriately so, since Dr. King's story is the story of *The African American Tale*. And so is Harriett Tubman's and Rosa Parks', Billie Holiday's, Nelson Mandela's and others' who remain unknown but have nonetheless fought for justice.

In fact, as the performance continues, you find *The African American Tale* isn't a single tale but a multitude of tales folded around one another like the buds of a flower. As the tale is told, each separate petal unfolds, some at the same time, others alone.

The story of great kings and beautiful African queens is danced in powerful movements and lavish costumes. At one time, these kings and queens ruled Africa, the show proclaims. Africa was a thriving, advanced culture when other civilizations around the world were still in their infancy.

Suddenly this pride is shattered by the next story: that of slavery. This story of capture is danced with quick sudden movements of panic and terror. When the capture is complete and the clenching chains bound, the story becomes slow and sorrowful, weighing heavily in the limbs of the dancers and sketched in agony on their faces.

The tale doesn't stop with slavery but shows the continued struggles and celebrations of blacks in this country, taking us through the decades from cotton-picking to the explosive jazz era and finally to Dr. King's dream that a day will come when a person is not judged by the color of his or her skin but his or her character.

The African American Tale is truly a multitude of stories about African Americans — but even this multifaceted tale, rich with history, passion, hope and struggle, is not the entire story. *The African American Tale* has yet another dimension: the stories of its cast, which are ultimately the story of the SGI's peace movement. No one better understands this than the group's director, Burt Woods, affectionately called "B.J." by the cast.

B.J. joined the practice in 1989. He soon hooked up with the SGI-USA's *This Is America* group and also participated on a flashcard team. Because of his skill and experience as a long-time performer and choreographer, who had danced with Michael Jackson and Della Reese, B.J. was asked to look into *The African American Tale* to see what he could contribute. Always looking for a challenge, B.J. thought the piece could develop his directorial skills. He discussed it with Gail Bunn, the author and initiator, and then took over as director.

When B.J. first saw *The African American Tale* performed in Long Beach, the cast numbered only six or seven and the roles were limited to mainly speaking and acting. He knew instantly what it would take to create a magnificent performance: more daimoku, unity and fearlessness about who they were. And there was another necessary element:

diversity. Back then the group consisted primarily of African Americans. Today, Italians, Jews, African Americans, Caucasians and Japanese participate.

“Diversity is the way to save humanity,” B.J. explained. “We all have humanity in us that transcends color.” Telling the story in a harsh, blaming tone was not appropriate either, he thought. Now the piece is realistic about the history, but its message that we human beings can transcend our colors and differences for the cause of world peace is center.

It is obvious that the cast members perform *The African American Tale* with a decided commitment to kosen-rufu. Of her performance as Harriett Tubman, Babe Evan says it is about encouraging people toward peace. Without this aspect, she realizes, her acting might end up being only egotistical.

Likewise, Jovin Montanaro, who has been part of the cast for a mere two weeks and an SGI member for two years, says performing in SGI functions has an added dimension from his other professional gigs. Since becoming a member, he’s learned to be more of a performer from the heart. “Ultimately you have to have joy,” he says. “If you work from the heart, you have a chance to move people.”

To further bring out the message of humanism, others in the group studied the meaning and characters of the piece. Gail Jennings was so moved she nearly cried when she saw Rosa Parks, whom she plays in *The African American Tale*, live on television. Now every time she performs, she tries to carry out Parks’ obvious dignity and humanity.

Rosslyn Jeffries, a singer and dancer who plays Billie Holiday, dedicates her performance to her father who died in 1992 and her mother who died of cancer two years ago. Her mother never saw the performance, only a video of it, but Rosslyn knows she understands the message. She was well informed of African American history and was always active in the civil rights movement.

All of the cast talk of doing human revolution together and chanting to unite. There were many struggles with the performances and rehearsals — at times with people just getting to the performances and rehearsals.

There were struggles in their personal lives as well. When it was learned a cast member’s grandmother was dying of cancer, one rehearsal was stopped for all to join in chanting for her health.

Judging from the audience reaction, the show’s message of peace and humanism comes through loud and clear. “It was beautiful that it concentrated on freedom,” said one. “It was a lot about Africa but ended up being about everybody, the whole world.”

Darla Alexander said there were so many messages in it, but was most happy to hear the positive message of hope.

Rachel Rockman was moved to tears by the finale, “None of Us Is Free if One of Us Is Chained.” “They expressed a lot of love for all mankind,” she said. “That’s what I’m walking around with. If one person is suffering, everybody suffers.”

Twelve-year-old Kai Perry said he liked the part about Martin Luther King Jr. the best. He felt the most important message *The African American Tale* gave him was that freedom is important — “Freedom for everybody; Martin Luther King Jr. died trying to make freedom for everybody,” he said.

Barbara Alston, a friend of a cast member, echoed that feeling: “We have to keep [King’s] dream alive for the children.”

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