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MAGPIE

“John Brown: Sword of the Spirit”

Sliced Bread Records

Greg Artzner and Terry Leonino, better known as the award-winning folk duo Magpie, have created a fascinating work with “Sword of the Spirit,” which looks at the history and legacy of abolitionist John Brown and the famous Harper’s Ferry raid of October, 1859. Brown hoped his violent civil action would galvanize the nation against slavery, which he called “sum of all villainies.” He failed and two months later, Brown and those in his party not killed in the raid were hanged. Sixteen months later, the Civil War began.

“Sword of the Spirit” is a musical extrapolation of a similarly titled one-act play created by Artzner, Leonino and Richard Henzel, set in Brown’s jail cell and constructed as letter-based conversations between Brown and his wife, Mary. Like the letters, the songs recount tumultuous history in decidedly human terms, focusing not just on Brown but his family and several others who made the ultimate sacrifice to end slavery.

Si Kahn’s kaleidoscopic “Old John Brown” provides a frame for the story, while Peggy Eyres’ “Mary Brown, Abolitionist” locates the familial cost of the raid. And Woody Guthrie’s “The Ballad of Harriet Tubman and Kim & Reggie Harris’ eloquent “Heaven is Less Than Fair” evoke the horror and anticipation of travel on the Underground Railroad.

Artzner and Leonino wrote the seven remaining songs after a tremendous amount of research at the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, the Library of Congress and elsewhere, relying on original documents and particularly, letters by the participants. As compelling as the Browns’ story may be, it is the voices of three former slaves [sic*] who fought and died with Brown that imbue this tale with deeper moral authority. They were Shields Green (“I Stood on the River of Jordan/Heaven Bound”), Dangerfield Newby

(“Dangerfield”) and “John Copeland,” and their roles are wisely elevated in the musical telling of the story.

Brown’s personal epiphanies are recounted in “Goodbye to Old Ohio” and “Captain,” in which he states his conviction the “only blood can purge these crimes [of slavery] away.” And just as Si Kahn’s opening song offers a snapshot of coming events, the closing “Testimony of Frederick Douglass recasts them with both personal and historic perspective. Distant history is made human by song, in voices that feel authentic and committed.

—*Richard Harrington*

** artist’s note: Shields Green escaped from slavery in Charleston, SC. Dangerfield Newby was manumitted by his “master” father upon his death. John Copeland of Oberlin, Ohio was never a slave.*