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Harlem Stage Takes Its Show on the Road for the First Time

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By Jonathan Abrams

Reporting from Greensboro, N.C.

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The bus was hard to miss as it cruised purposefully, South to North, making pit stops at pivotal civil rights landmarks. Its exterior was all black with large pictures of Black actors and the words “*Harlem Stage Presents FREEDOM RIDERS.*”

The bus transported 63 people, including the actors, musicians and production team for “Freedom Riders,” a theatrical concert featuring monologues about law enforcement harassment and violence endured by Black people mostly going about their everyday business. After the show’s tour through the South, a limited run begins this week at Harlem Stage.

The troupe played at Montgomery’s Alabama First Baptist Church, one of the nation’s oldest Black houses of worship and a gathering place for Ralph Abernathy and others during the civil rights movement and bus boycott. They received applause at Atlanta University Center, the consortium for four historically Black colleges and universities that incubated generations of students. They filled seats at Greensboro’s Harrison Auditorium on North Carolina A&T State University’s campus, near the Woolworth building where the sit-ins of 1960 helped begin the civil rights movement.

“Our history is rooted in this very journey,” said Indira Etwaroo, Harlem Stage’s chief executive and artistic director.

With a modest annual budget of around \$4.5 million, this is the first time Harlem Stage has taken a show on the road.

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For Etwaroo, who assumed her role last year after leading Brooklyn’s Billie Holiday Theatre, reaching an audience outside of New York was essential.

“To just stay rooted in West Harlem without going to where our communities were going to more affordable housing and increased quality of life would mean that we were not rising to meet the moment,” Etwaroo said.

“Freedom Riders” is a familiar story, and its subtitle — “A Journey With No End in Sight” — suggests that its contents are evergreen.

“It feels to me that we are in a fugue state, that there’s cultural amnesia, that we keep repeating the ills of the past, that the rights that one generation fights for, it reintroduces itself, and another generation has to fight once again for those same rights,” Etwaroo.

Most of the readings are extracted from “12 Angry Men: True Stories of Being a Black Man in America Today,” a book first published in 2010 and edited by Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughey.

In it, Solomon Moore, a former New York Times journalist, describes being aggressively accosted by police while reporting on anti-gang law enforcement. Paul Butler, a prominent law professor, discusses police tailing him closely as he walked in his own Washington, D.C. neighborhood. Joshua T. Wiley, a Black man from Asheville, N.C., recounts being assaulted on what should have been a carefree outing with a couple friends.

Etwaroo first brought the concert to the Billie Holiday in 2015 with an all-male cast. In 2020, she added a reading about Breonna Taylor, the 26 year-old emergency room technician killed by law enforcement while sleeping in her Kentucky apartment. Past performances included actors such as John Amos, John David Washington and Wendell Pierce.

Russell Hornsby (“Fences,” “The Hate U Give,” “Grimm”) performed in the concert’s original rendition and is also signed up for the current limited run. Hornsby says that this is a different experience now that he is participating after becoming the father of two children.

“The elder gets reminded and the young person gets an education,” Hornsby said.

When he performed a decade ago, the nation was at a different juncture socially. Since then, George Floyd’s killing roiled the United States, leading to policing reforms in some states and a heightened focus on social justice and systemic racism. But now many of those same reform initiatives are being dismantled and rolled back.

“It seems like every time we get ahead, we realize there’s more work to be done,” said Divinity Roxx, a bassist who helped compose the concert’s live musical score. “This piece is in the spirit of that.”

“Freedom Riders” includes a reading about Frances Thompson, a once-enslaved Black transgender woman and activist who testified in front of a congressional committee about being raped by a mob during the Memphis riots of 1866, and Dominique (Rem’mie) Fells, a Black transgender woman murdered in Philadelphia in June 2020.

Angelica Ross (“Pose,” “American Horror Story”) depicts both Thompson and Fells in the concert. At one point, Hornsby portrayed Fells’s father. “I don’t know if I’ve said this to him, but I get so emotional when I hear him do his part because he shouts, ‘That was my daughter, she was a woman to me,’” said Ross, who was the first openly trans woman to play a leading role on Broadway when she starred as Roxie Hart in “Chicago.” “Just hearing that and feeling that is so powerful,” she added.

In Greensboro, the performance closed with a lengthy applause and a long reading of names affected by police violence.

From Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina and all the way to New York, the bus received some second glances and stares, according to some of the riders. It was designed for such reactions. Many people have been curious and, after learning of the reading and its mission, offered support as the bus bended its way home to Harlem.

“Everybody seems to understand the weight of this,” Ross said of those on board. “When we’re talking about all of this, this is not to educate anybody. This is to look at each other and to affirm: ‘I know. I know what you’ve been through. I’ve been through some of that, too. You’re not alone.’”

Jonathan Abrams is a Times reporter who writes about the intersections of sports and culture and the changing cultural scenes in the South.