

## REVIEW

# A tale of unbridled spirit

## Growing Stage's 'Midnight Cry' is honest but uneven

## NEW JERSEY STAGE

**A Midnight Cry**

**Where:** The Growing Stage, 7 Ledgewood Ave., Route 183, Netcong

**When:** Through Feb. 11. Fridays at 7:30 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 4 p.m.

**How much:** \$14 adults, \$10 children and seniors. Call (973) 347-4946 or visit [www.growingstage.com](http://www.growingstage.com).

BY PETER FILICHIA  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

"A Midnight Cry" proves the Growing Stage is certainly growing.

The Netcong company has for 25 years offered mostly fairytales ("Sleeping Beauty") and beloved children's stories ("Winnie the Pooh") to the 5-to-9 crowd. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Now, though, the state's premier children's theater is tackling a more serious issue — slavery — in a play aimed at teenagers and adults.

Lida, a black teen, and her Mama, Papa and Uncle Eli are slaves in mid-19th century Missouri. Jessup, their owner, is terribly unfeeling, but his employee Bullard is worse. He believes that by being as cruel as possible, he'll greatly impress his employer.

Uncle Eli has surreptitiously learned to read and teaches Lida, who's enthralled to have the skill. The more she reads, however, the more she yearns for freedom. After she accidentally wounds Bullard — and is severely whipped for it — she needs it more. When she hears

about the Underground Railroad, she's willing to flee and take her chances.

John Pietrowski has assembled a flawless cast and has made certain they treat the material honestly. While some directors would have made Jessup an unrelentingly evil character, he makes sure Artie Elwell portrays him as preoccupied: Being indifferent to slaves is business as usual.

Even the pain that Janece Aisha Freeman shows in Lida's eyes can't extinguish her character's innate elegance. Freeman's expression when she learns to read "t-h-e" is genuinely beatific. Few won't be moved when she proudly cries out, "I read it myself!"

Mama tries to quietly reason with the whites whenever she or her loved ones get in trouble, though she's all the while truly frightened that her rational arguments won't work. Sahiera Johnson is most effective here, as well as when she sings. The actress, who performed "Seasons of Love" in national companies of "Rent," beautifully delivers some spirituals.

Tony Robinson has a wonderful moment as Papa. When he's reminded that the Union boasts some free states, he says in a knowing voice, "They ain't as free as everybody thinks they are."

Jeremy William Hilgert, who was so sensitive as Toad in Growing Stage's recent "A Year with Frog and Toad," shows his range by drawing all the terror from the vengeful Bullard.

There are two problems. First, playwright James DeVita begins receiving a book that Lida has written. After he shows their astonishment at her success, he flashes back to her aforementioned struggles. Because he immediately tips off his audience that she became an author, we needn't worry when the dogs are nipping at her heels.

The other problem is harder to fix. After a first act where Elwell has been a cruel master who's ordered Lida whipped, he is lovely to her when the second act begins. Kids — and adults — will wonder what caused this change. Not a thing: Elwell is playing a different character, an Underground Railroad volunteer.

Granted, theaters must have actors double in roles to save a salary. Still, Pietrowski should have at least slapped a mustache on Elwell in one of the acts so the audience could tell the difference between master and benefactor.

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Janece Aisha Freeman, left, Tony Robinson and Sahiera Johnson, right, star in "A Midnight Cry."