



THE GROWING STAGE, THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE OF NEW JERSEY

Janeece Aisha Freeman, left, and Sahirah Johnson appear in "A Midnight Cry," which runs at the Palace Theatre in Netcong through Feb. 11.

ONSTAGE

Growing Stage spotlights Underground Railroad

By WILLIAM WESTHOVEN
Staff Writer

Less than half of the seats were occupied for the first show of 2007 at The Growing Stage, The Children's Theatre of New Jersey, where a full house is common on opening night. One can only hope that "A Midnight Cry" finds a larger audience, because this stirring, fact-based drama is crying to be seen.

Based on the narrative of a Missouri slave, James DeVita's story takes us along the fabled Underground Railroad, the network of courageous volunteers who helped slaves escape from the South to free states in the North. This one may not be for the preschoolers normally present here in abundance (perhaps a reason for the drop in attendance) — there's knives, guns, whippings and lots of shouting — but important lessons for the rest of us, including a powerful statement about the

importance of literacy.

Learning to read and write was the turning point in the life of Lida Anderson, the 17-year-old daughter in a family of slaves in St. Louis. Longing for a better life, she begs her uncle Eli to share his literacy with her.

When she overhears talk about the Underground Railroad, she vows to hop on board. Her mama forbids her, revealing that Lida's father was crippled in his attempt at escape, but

Lida can't be stopped.

With the nasty overseer hot on her trail, Lida stays one step ahead as she's handed off from one kind stranger to another, some white, some black, all willing

See MIDNIGHT, Page D-3

STORY CHAT
Respond to this story at c-n.com

Midnight

From Page D-1

to risk big trouble for getting caught.

Some of the scenes are quite intense, including loud threats, a stabbing and a humiliating scene when Lida's sister is forced to auction ("she's worth at least \$15 a pound," her owner declares directly to the audience). In another scene, the ensemble sings a moving spiritual as the snap of a whip (aimed at Lida) can be heard.

Not the usual menu at the Growing Stage, which is the only professional resident children's theater in New Jersey. Another sign that the Growing Stage is targeting an expanded audience is the presence of director John Pietrowski, longtime artistic director of Playwrights Theater in Madison, which is known for more developmental (and grownup) productions.

Pietrowski, a skilled and experienced director, is a "good get" for the Growing Stage and right away shows his knack for working with

actors.

Leading the way is Janeece Aisha Freeman, who, as Lida, is the only member of the cast to stay in single character. A lovely young woman with a beautiful singing voice, Freeman has top-shelf Broadway, off-Broadway and regional credits, and seems at ease in the spotlight.

Her chirpy speaking voice is a little too "Gone with the Wind" for my taste, but, along with her authentic Southern accent, it fits the time and place.

Fellow Growing Stage newcomer Sahirah Johnson's accent and singing were the equal of Freeman's. Although she looked a bit young to play Lida's mother, she gave all of her many characters a gentle strength and pride. So, too did Tony Robinson (seen here previously in "The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus") as Lida's father.

The ensemble sings harmonies worth the price of admission while Pietrowski navigates them through a complex series of scenes, using only benches, barrels, crates and quilts to serve as both props and scenery. Their success is evident by how easy they

made it look.

I was told that bookings for special school showings of "A Midnight Cry" are strong, but with regular performances through Feb. 11 — which appropriately cross into Black History Month — there's plenty of opportunities for everyone to give this show the attention it deserves.

If you want to go

What: "A Midnight Cry"

When: Through Feb.

Where: Palace Theatre, Netcong, 1000 Ledgewood Ave. (Route 206)

How Much: \$14; \$10 for students

Info: (973) 347-4900
www.growingstage.com

La Scala

FINE ITALIAN CUISINE

Early Bird Special 4-6PM

Every Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday

SPECIAL:

4-Course Meal

\$21/Person

- On and Off Premise C
- Private Parties from 8
- Outdoor Dining
- Daily Specials
- Take Out Available
- Reservations Recommended
- Closed Mondays

117 NORTH GASTON AVE • SOMERVILLE, NJ

tel: 908.218.9300 • fax: 908.218.0055

www.lascalafineitalian.com

Celebrating 10 Years in Business