

2011

## Harriet Jacobs Kansas City Repertory Theatre (review)

Jocelyn Buckner

*Chapman University*, [jbuckner@chapman.edu](mailto:jbuckner@chapman.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/theatre\\_articles](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/theatre_articles)



Part of the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Buckner, Jocelyn L. "Harriet Jacobs Kansas City Repertory Theatre (review)." *Theatre Journal* 63.3 (2011): 460-462.

DOI:10.1353/tj.2011.0084

This Performance Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theatre at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theatre Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

---

## Harriet Jacobs Kansas City Repertory Theatre (review)

### Comments

This article was originally published in *Theatre Journal*, volume 63, issue 3, in 2011. DOI: [10.1353/tj.2011.0084](https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2011.0084)

### Copyright

Johns Hopkins University Press

**HARRIET JACOBS.** By Lydia R. Diamond.  
Directed by Jessica Thebus. Kansas City  
Repertory Theatre. Copaken Stage, Kansas  
City. 30 October 2010.

Harriet Jacobs, a slave in nineteenth-century America, documented her life and the ordeal of her escape in her memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Fleeing the torments of a lecherous, sexually obsessed master and his jealous wife by hiding for seven years in a tiny attic garret above her grandmother's house, Jacobs finally seized an opportunity to board a ship to freedom in New York. Written after her escape and published in 1861, the slave narrative became one of the most important texts of the abolitionist movement and was the inspiration for *Harriet Jacobs*, Lydia Diamond's newest literary adaptation for the stage. *Harriet Jacobs* provided artists and audiences alike the opportunity to understand the American slave experience through the live performance of one individual's journey to freedom. Seeing Jacobs's struggles embodied onstage created an intimacy and urgency to her story that is not immediately accessible in the formal language of her memoir. Kansas City Repertory Theatre director Jessica Thebus used spare yet versatile design elements, staged the act of writing to locate Jacobs's voice within and as the basis of the performance, and juxtaposed energetic ensemble scenes with quietly arresting monologues to emphasize the communal struggles and individual isolation of slavery in this dramatic representation of Jacobs's story.

The spare staging echoed the bareness of Jacobs's hiding place, her bleak prospects for escape, and the stark world of slavery. Collette Pollard (set design), J. R. Lederle (lighting design), Andre Pluess (composer / sound design), and Jeffrey Cady (projection design) developed an integrated aesthetic that evoked a sense of entrapment and desperation in the world of the play: Edenton, North Carolina, 1827–32.



Cast of *Harriet Jacobs*. (Photo: Don Ipock.)

The set consisted of a large, splintery wooden structure reminiscent of a primitive slave shack. In the back wall of the set were several tall, thin windows, which opened to a scrim that was lit for dramatic effect. At the beginning and end of the performance, projected on the scrim was the title page of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in homage to the inspiration for the play. Throughout the performance, the scrim displayed acres of cotton and tall pine trees, defining the topography where the slaves lived and worked. Through the windows, the performers' silhouettes appeared against this backdrop during scenes of harvesting, singing, and dancing. Viewing the performers through the set's narrow windows created the impression of looking between the bars of a jail cell, symbolizing the slaves' entrapment in the system. This eerie, stylized depiction of slaves' extreme physical labor, psychological burden, and resilient humanity both allowed the audience to imagine their experiences and created an aesthetic distance to facilitate critical reflection on the institution of slavery itself.

Other design elements also communicated the desperate circumstances of the slaves' world. Using only essential hand-props and the occasional stool to establish location and action during scenes, the slaves' labor often involved stylized pantomime (Tyrone Aiken, movement director). The all-black cast played slaves, masters, and mistresses, the latter being designated by the donning of blindly

white costume pieces like gloves, top hat, and coat-tails or a corset and skirt worn on top of the actors' slave costumes. These pieces stood in stark contrast to the neutral and muted tones of the set and the slaves' clothing and threw the white characters into high relief against the slaves' environment. Jeremy Floyd's multilayered costume design emphasized the arbitrary designation, social construction, and material conditions of racial identities both during Jacobs's lifetime and in our contemporary society.

Diamond's script dramatizes Jacobs's documentation of her time in hiding. In this production, Jacobs's handwriting visually scrawled across the scrim, while the sound of writing aurally scratched through the air. This theatricalization emphasized the sheer volume of her writings and the passage of time. The prominent use of writing in the show highlighted Jacobs's narration of events and created a distinction between her voice and the performers' embodiment of her story. It became the dramatic tool by which Nambi Kelley as Jacobs transitioned from scenes with other characters to storytelling addressed directly to the audience while she was confined in her attic hideout. Since much of Kelley's performance took place in hiding, writing helped forward the action and defined the hiding space's physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics. The long, narrow, triangular cutout space was built into the proscenium high above the stage and hovered just below the eaves of the house. Although



Cheryl Lynn Bruce (Grandma) and Nambi Kelley (Harriet Jacobs) in *Harriet Jacobs*.  
(Photo: Don Ipock.)

the space limited physical movement, it glowed in the light of Jacobs's candle and swelled with the resolve, desperation, and hope reflected in her writing. It was simultaneously a womb- and tomb-like space that the audience (and Jacobs herself) wondered if she would ever succeed in exiting alive.

As an ensemble, the cast performed traditional spirituals and dances aimed at underscoring slaves' solidarity and struggle for dignity in the face of collective hardship. Smaller scenes depicted the bonds between Jacobs and other family members and slaves, such as her Grandma (Cheryl Lynn Bruce) and sweetheart Tom (Phillip James Brannon). Throughout the play, Diamond alternates these scenes of communal strength with monologues of individual slaves. In these solitary moments, performed by actors in direct address to the audience, the glaring truth and hardships of slaves' lives were stripped of any cultural nostalgia or sentimentality. This staging lent intimacy and immediacy to Jacobs's slave narrative. She not only dared to tell her story, but also relayed the ordeals and suffer-

ing she observed all around her. These monologues heightened the dramatic conflict and tension among the slaves, their masters, and their environment and underscored the necessity of escape and emancipation not only for Jacobs, but for all slaves.

Diamond's work enabled artists to embody these stories, making them accessible to contemporary audiences who may either be unaware of the atrocities of slavery experienced on a personal level or lulled into a false sense of these practices as irrelevant in our current "post-racial" moment. Kansas City Repertory Theatre's *Harriet Jacobs* disallowed these dismissals of history in favor of a dramatic representation of one woman's story of struggle and triumph that facilitated reflection upon past truths and their impact on our collective present.

JOCELYN L. BUCKNER  
*University of Pittsburgh*

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST.

By Oscar Wilde. Directed by Brian Bedford. Roundabout Theatre Company. The American Airlines Theatre, New York City. 17 December 2010.

Immediately after Oscar Wilde's death in 1900, psychics and impersonators tried to summon back the Irishman's spirit. The Roundabout Theatre Company's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (itself reincarnated from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival's 2009 season) faithfully and successfully channeled Wilde and the target of his humor—Victorian morality, fin-de-siècle fashion, and English manners. While the 1895 production at London's St. James's Theatre held an elegant mirror up to audience members, who were invited to laugh at fashionably attired characters not unlike themselves, the 2010 incarnation managed to elicit laughter from jeans-clad, texting-savvy spectators. Wilde's pitch-perfect dialogue and visually nuanced farce disarmed and engaged accidental tourists and Wilde aficionados alike through Brian Bedford's "earnest" rendering.

With perhaps a nod to nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, Bedford served less as a visionary director than as an actor-manager. However, unlike the first producer of *Earnest*, George Alexander, who took the lead role of Jack Worthing, Bedford inserted himself into a noteworthy lineage of grande dames that includes such legends as Rose Leclerc (the original Lady Bracknell), Dame Edith Evans, and Dame Judi Dench by assuming the now-famous dowager role. Bedford majestically entering from upstage left