



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: MAY 15, 2008

New Musical to Showcase In Des Moines

Unexpected Company will present workshop performances of *Hearts of Freedom*, an original musical by Iowa artists Brian R. Lynner and Lisa Norris, on **Friday, May 30 at 7:30 pm** and **Sunday, June 1 at 3:00 pm** in the **Iowa Public Theatre at the State Historical Society of Iowa**, 600 East Locust in Des Moines. An additional performance will be held at **7:30 pm** on **Saturday, May 31** in the Chapel at **Westminster Presbyterian Church**, 4114 Allison Avenue in Des Moines. **All performances are free to the public** with free will donations accepted. All donations from the Saturday performance will benefit the Westminster Fine Arts Series.

Hearts of Freedom is the story of two couples – one in the North, the other in the South – who fall in love during the tumultuous years of the U.S. Civil War. It is also the story of Elijah, a slave who finds his way to freedom on the Underground Railroad. The production contains over 15 original musical numbers that explore the issues of duty, honor, patriotism and courage, as well as love, loss, and the true meaning of freedom. The production features a cast of over 20 local performers, including Craig Petersen, Preshia Paulding, Rich Richards, Pernell Ferguson, John Robinson, Joel Kinser, Ali Mostrom, Jenn Miller, and Maureen Korte.

How does a new play get started? The genesis of the *Hearts of Freedom* happened by accident back in 2000, when Lynner and Norris began working on a musical adaptation of the *John Brown's Body*, an epic Civil War poem by Stephen Vincent Benet. As the music developed, the writing team decided to abandon the Benet poem and create a completely new story. *Hearts of Freedom* first premiered as a staged reading/workshop production for the Drama Workshop in May of 2003 – just as America was entering the conflict with Iraq.



“When we did the first workshop, the country was in such a patriotic fervor, both Brian and I felt that it hurt the commercial viability of the show,” says Norris. “When you’re just embarking on a war, the last thing people want is to be reminded of how horrible war can be. We also discovered that we had been very one-sided in our point of view – very anti-war – and that made us feel like there was something missing.” The project went back to the drawing board for a couple of years, and Lynner and Norris worked on it sporadically while they pursued other theatre projects. In 2006, feeling they had gained some perspective, they began a complete overhaul of both script and score. Songs were cut, some new songs were added, and the plot has changed radically from the original draft of the script. “It feels like a completely different play now,” says Norris.

PRESS RELEASE: *Hearts of Freedom*, cont.

The political climate has changed, too. “There are so many parallels between what has happened with Iraq and the Civil War,” says Lynner. “Here’s a conflict that everyone thought would be over quickly but went on for years, where a soldier’s original term of enlistment was extended far beyond his original contract. As we were researching the show, we found so many examples of political propaganda used during the Civil War that could have been written yesterday. I think that there are many elements in this story that are going to strike a chord with people, regardless of their political ideology. War has an effect on everyone, in both positive and negative ways, and I think we’ve tried to balance that in this incarnation of the show.”

The workshop is an important part of the ongoing development of the musical, and having an audience is a key aspect of the process. “For any new play, it is crucial to get the work on its feet before an audience,” says Norris. “It’s invaluable to hear the dialogue and music performed and get audience reactions, because it allows you see what works well, and where you need to make refinements. Producing a musical in a completely realized form is a very costly venture. This workshop allows us to take the next step in ensuring what we have is of high quality before shopping the show to producers or investors.” *Hearts of Freedom* will be presented concert-style – no sets or costumes – just a presentation of the complete script and musical score, performed by local actors and singers. Audiences will be requested to complete an online survey after attending the production and give the company feedback on the show. The project is supported in part by a grant from the Iowa Arts Council, a division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs.

For more information on the *Hearts of Freedom* project, please call **Lisa Norris** at **515-288-9163**, or e-mail unexpectedco@mchsi.com. Information is also available on the **Unexpected Company** web site at www.unexpectedcompany.com.



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