THE SILENT WAR

The Story of the Underground Railroad For Reader's Theatre

By Clete Melick

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STORY

Here is a perfect play to introduce children to the Underground Railroad, slavery and abolition. Designed as a Reader's Theatre, *The Silent War* is a story of three slaves – and eight little mice – who escape to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Uncle Amos, Belle, and Buck Henry, all slaves on a Kentucky plantation, didn't plan to escape until they met Zakary, a Bible salesman and abolitionist. He shows them the way to cross the river into Ohio and from there travel north to other stations. Along the way, the three slaves are helped by other dedicated abolitionists including a minister who runs an orphanage, a brave farm lady, and a clever mortician, all of whom are willing to fight the Silent War at great risk to their own lives.

Traveling with the slaves are a few mice, whose own stories are told by the quirky, lovable mouse, Zillion.

This play illustrates how the Silent War helped thousands of former slaves became free men and women in the years before the Civil War began.

About 30 minutes. Simple setting. Possible multimedia.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 2 w)

READER 1: plays the Narrator and Uncle Amos.

READER 2: plays Zillion, a mouse.

READER 3: plays Belle, a house slave.

READER 4: plays Buck Henry, a field slave.

READER 5: plays Megan Harner, a farm lady and abolitionist who hauled many North with her.

READER 6: plays Zakary, a Bible salesman-abolitionist; and Father Dominic who runs an orphanage; and Mortimer, the Mortician

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Stools with music stands can be used for a setting with possibly a projection screen behind for showing images. The show would work well with period music used as underscore and as intro and exit from the show.

At one point Buck refers to a job as a "gandy dancer," a term for someone who works on the maintenance crew of a railroad. The term was often used specifically in reference to black track workers.

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(READERS are gathered on stools or chairs arranged artistically near the front of the stage. There could be a projection screen behind them on which to flash slides that back up the story and help to visually interpret the words, especially during the ending poem. MUSIC of the period could also be used to help tell the story.)

1ST READER: Our story begins in the shadowy period before the Civil War. Our ancestors were busy settling the wilderness, building roads, canals, and cities. But something else was also happening in those times - a silent war against the evils of slavery. A strong current of dissatisfaction was building just beneath the surface of local and national politics.

2ND READER: A surge of emotion that would break forth in the violence of civil war, pitting the North against the South. We think we know the history of the Civil War, but we are generally not aware of the "Silent War" that preceded it. And the incredible bravery of the men and women who served as couriers on the Underground Railroad, fighting against slavery.

3RD READER: Long before the Lincoln-Douglas debates,

4TH READER: …the election of Abe Lincoln as President,

5TH READER: …the John Brown raid on Harper's Ferry,

6TH READER: …a quiet revolution was already taking place.

1ST READER: The seeds of freedom ... freedom for all men ... were sprouting in the hearts and minds of thoughtful men and women all over the North and border states, and even among some Southerners who were sympathetic toward the black slaves and their problems.

4TH READER: These people of like mind were called abolitionists, in that they wished to abolish slavery. In general, they were a secretive group of people not given to boasting of their beliefs in saloons, barber shops, and businesses around town.

5TH READER: Quietly, they worked together, using their money, property and abilities to further the cause of freedom for black slaves from the South.

2ND READER: This is the story we want to tell ... how the abolitionists set up a transportation system called the "Underground Railroad" to pass slaves from the border states along the Ohio River, through Ohio, into Canada and freedom.

3RD READER: And how they fought for years in the "Silent War" against slavery.

1ST READER: The Freedom Road began at the Ohio River. If the slaves could get across that water, by bridge, or boat, or swimming, they had a chance. But slave-catchers, bounty hunters, bloodhounds, spies and traitors were everywhere in the river towns. Who could be trusted? And who would help? It was a chancy game. Some slaves walked boldly across the bridges on their master's errands, only to disappear quickly in the city crowds. Others rowed a skiff with muffled oars on a moonless night across the broad Ohio toward freedom. Some swam the river. Some tired halfway, and drowned, never finding the trail to freedom. Some slaves were caught by slave catchers and returned beaten and in chains to their owners. It was highly dangerous, but many traveled the Freedom Road.

2ND READER: How many slaves escaped to Canada? We'll never know. Who helped them along the way? We can never be sure. Even today, people are reluctant to call their ancestors "abolitionists" even though they might admit their home may have been a stop on the "Underground Railroad."

2ND READER: *(Cont'd.)* They may point out a secret room, a root cellar, or a basement tunnel leading toward the river.

3RD READER: "We think this area was used to hide runaway slaves …"

2ND READER: …they might say. But trying to pin down the story - who, when, how - is like trying to corner wood smoke. Is it truth, or myth, this "Underground Railroad"?

4TH READER: Oh, we have maps of the routes to Canada as they cross Ohio. Cincinnati, Xenia, Bellefontaine, Kenton, Tiffin, Oberlin, Cleveland is one possible route. And there are many others, point to point. But Freedom Road was not a broad highway, nor was it even a railroad.

5TH READER: It was in fact, secret, wooded river trails, through deep forests with caves and hidey holes; root cellars and basement coal bins, barn lofts, and dark tobacco barns. Its "stations" were places where men or women could hide in safety, until they could be passed along to the next stop, in loads of hay, or steamer trunks, or false wagon bottoms, under a load of wooden fence posts.

6TH READER: Fear and sweat, thirst and darkness were constant companions on this Freedom Road. Men, women, and children traveled this way, never sure if they could make it to the next station.

1ST READER: The risk was not only to the slaves,

2ND READER: …but to those who helped them to freedom.

3RD READER: The judge, doctor, or businessman would be ruined, if it was discovered he helped slaves.

4TH READER: A teacher or minister would be fired from their job.

5TH READER: A farmer could have his crops burned, or his livestock poisoned.

End of Freeview

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