

THEATER

Playing a ‘Game’ to Reveal Uncomfortable Truths About Race

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES SEPT. 7, 2016

For Scott Sheppard, a creator of a new play called “Underground Railroad Game,” the real game it’s based on was one of those childhood experiences that seem normal at the time, but weird, even horrifying, in retrospect.

Playing it was meant to be educational for Mr. Sheppard, now 32, and his fellow fifth graders in 1990s Hanover, Pa., a historically minded town just north of the Mason-Dixon Line, near Gettysburg.

For a unit on the Civil War, teachers split the students, who were overwhelmingly white, into two teams: Union soldiers, whose task in the game was to smuggle as many slaves — represented by dolls — as possible to freedom in Canada, and Confederate soldiers, charged with recapturing the dolls as they made their way north.

“Basically the Confederate soldiers were patrolling the hallways and looking around between classes or at lunch,” Mr. Sheppard said. “The Union kids were looking for opportunities to sneak the slaves in their book bags or in their pockets so that they could move them to the next safe house.”

Whichever side amassed the most points by the end of the unit won the war.

Beginning performances on Tuesday, Sept. 13, at Ars Nova, “Underground Railroad Game” — a squirm-inducing, comic two-hander about the legacy of slavery in America, sex included — is the creation of Mr. Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell with their Philadelphia-based theater company, Lightning Rod Special.

(Toby Zinman, a theater critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, called the play a “brilliant theatrical commentary on contemporary race relations.”)

Directed by Taibi Magar, the show’s New York premiere comes at a moment when the Underground Railroad has returned to the cultural conversation (think Colson Whitehead’s novel “The Underground Railroad” and Ben H. Winters’s novel “Underground Airlines”), partly because of the 150th anniversary last year of the end of the Civil War.

Ms. Kidwell plays Teacher Caroline, who in the game is the general of the Union Army. Mr. Sheppard plays Teacher Stuart, her Confederate counterpart. Like their characters, Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard are a study in contrasts, not just physically — she’s more compact, he’s lankier; she’s black, he’s white — but also in personality, background, outlook.

Her humor is dry and jabbing, her conversation inquisitive and disputatious. A chatty Baltimore native, she can shift easily between academic-speak (at Columbia, she studied the literature of marginalized communities) and astrology. She’s been in the thick of debates over racial politics, having played the fictional black artist Donelle Woolford in Joe Scanlan’s “Dick’s Last Stand,” a piece that drew heat from some actual black artists at the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

The earnestly reflective Mr. Sheppard, on the other hand, seems exactly like the Friends school English teacher he once was.

“We are not natural collaborators,” Ms. Kidwell, 38, said recently at a cafe around the corner from Ars Nova. Yet in the years since they started working on the show, in 2013, a tight friendship has grown between them. “We’re very close,” she acknowledged. “And it’s kind of crazy.”

“We infamously disagree and argue all the time,” Mr. Sheppard said in a separate interview. “We agree on the core 10 percent that is the heart of the piece, and everything beyond that is battleground.”

Yet watching them wheel around a rehearsal room late one August afternoon, gracefully remaking a dance in the show with the choreographer David Neumann, their chemistry was obvious.

When they met five years ago in Philadelphia, as students at the brand-new Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training, Ms. Kidwell was a little skeptical of Mr. Sheppard. Even in their small class, they didn't work together much. She had no idea how wickedly funny he could be until the night they went out with mutual friends, and he told the bizarre story of the Underground Railroad game.

Later he suggested that they make a piece about it. But it was only when they went to a talk about the Underground Railroad, at Independence National Historical Park, that they found in the speaker's awkwardness something they could latch onto.

“He was a white man, and he was having a lot of difficulty saying ‘black people,’ ‘African-American people,’” Ms. Kidwell said. “He kept stumbling over the large swath of people that the talk was referencing.”

Language about race is a principal focus of the play: who is permitted to say what, the way speech shapes and reveals thought, the pain that history has embedded in certain words. In rehearsal, some white members of the production team have been skittish about uttering a racial epithet that is part of the show, while Ms. Kidwell says she is fine with that word in context. What bothers her is calling anyone a slave — rather than, say, an enslaved person.

Using the word slave, she said, puts “a distance between us and their personhood.”

One mocking bit of dialogue in the show, calling the Underground Railroad “a silver lining to the dark cloud of slavery,” was inspired by a 2015 episode of the public radio program “Here & Now,” which said that “with the abolition of one of the worst parts of our history” — that is, slavery — “came the end of one of the most uplifting, the Underground Railroad.”

To Mr. Sheppard, such phrasing is “seemingly a small verbal slip that actually demonstrates this much larger problem with the way we obfuscate the horror of slavery,” telling stories that “allow white people to not look or feel so bad.”

“Underground Railroad Game” is not interested in providing that kind of

salve; it would like to shift its audience's thinking. Yet Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard have realized that in many ways, the show echoes their own attempts to find affinity with each other.

“If I took a survey, I would fill out all the correct answers about my beliefs of race in America,” he said. “But what we're getting at in this piece is the more unconscious things, the things that happen around your feelings and how you connect with people and whether or not there can be true intimacy.”

To judge by their opposing interpretations of a metaphor borrowed from geometry — the asymptote, whose lines approach without ever intersecting — the answer to that might not be an easy yes.

“One line is curved, the other line is straight,” Ms. Kidwell explained, “but the principle of the asymptote is that they're never going to meet.” She sees “a kind of crushing beauty” in that futility, whereas Mr. Sheppard looks at the same thing and sees something more like hope.

“He's like: ‘Yeah, but they're trying. They're moving toward it,’” she said. “And I'm like: ‘They can try all day, but it's not going to happen.’”

A version of this article appears in print on September 11, 2016, on page AR5 of the New York edition with the headline: Playing for Real.

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/2d5fPC3>

THEATER

Let's Play 'Underground Railroad Game': A Lacerating Comedy on Race

Underground Railroad Game | NYT Critics' Pick | Off Broadway, Comedy/Drama, Play

1 hr. and 10 min. | Closing Date: November 11, 2016 | Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. | 866-811-4111

By **BEN BRANTLEY** SEPT. 26, 2016

Our "safe word" for today is "Sojourner."

Those three syllables are the gift of Teacher Stuart and Teacher Caroline to their fifth-grade students in Hanover, Pa., to be used in moments of distress during an especially adventurous history project. "Sojourner," boys and girls, is what you say when you find yourself way outside your comfort zone and need to take a break.

It's a fairly, uh, safe bet that you will find yourself tempted to cry "Sojourner" on many occasions before the end of "Underground Railroad Game," the in-all-ways sensational play that opened on Monday night at Ars Nova. Just don't expect anyone to have mercy on you.

As you may have gathered from its title and its safe word (which refers to the 19th-century African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth), "Underground Railroad Game" is about slavery. More specifically, this lacerating comedy from the Lightning Rod Special troupe in Philadelphia is about finding ways to speak to one another about an unspeakable American institution a century and a half after its official end.

But, wait, you say; slavery is hardly a taboo subject these days. Only two years ago, “12 Years a Slave” won the Oscar for best picture; there’s been deafening buzz around the coming film “The Birth of a Nation,” Nate Parker’s take on the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner. Colson Whitehead’s novel “The Underground Railroad” is a best seller. And Monday night was the New York opening of not only “Underground Railroad Game” but also a play by Nathan Alan Davis called “Nat Turner in Jerusalem.”

But “Underground Railroad Game” is different. For one thing, it is set in the present (though it is clear that the past is always present). For another, its tone, at least at first, would appear to be arch instead of earnest. That is not to say that it is frivolous. Created by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard, who are also its entire cast, this production lures you into its seemingly sunny classroom with the snarky cheer of a hip comedy sketch.

[Meet the creators of 'Underground Railroad Game']

But as its title promises, this play winds up taking you into subterranean territory. It is dark and treacherous down there, and cool comic posturing melts into a big hot mess. Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard, both in their 30s, find the lie in the flippant, “we know better” irony that often flavors interracial dialogue among the young and willfully liberal.

The trajectory of this underground railroad is from blithe, barbed self-consciousness to the subconscious, where land mines you pretended didn’t exist keep exploding. And as directed by Taibi Magar, with an exceptionally resourceful design team, the play conjures searing theatrical visuals to match its wayward words, the sort of images that used to send people to Freudian analysts when they cropped up in nightmares.

The play’s premise and structure come from childhood memories of Mr. Sheppard, who participated in a history-lesson game devised by teachers in his middle school. Students were divided into teams representing the Union and Confederate Armies, with the Yankees doing their best to smuggle slaves

(embodied by dolls) past the Southerners.

The rules of this competition are explained to us early in the play by the cheerfully synced team of Teacher Caroline (Ms. Kidwell), who is black, and Teacher Stuart (Mr. Sheppard), who is white. They speak with the slow, carefully cadenced friendliness you associate with instructors of young students, as they tell us that the Underground Railroad “was the silver lining to the dark cloud that was slavery.”

But though they share a teaching plan, a tone of voice and a child-friendly vocabulary, it is clear from the outset that Caroline and Stuart aren't always on the same page. The subject of American slavery is personal to her; to him, too, but in different ways. When they begin an off-duty romance, that gap widens into a chasm that sends Caroline and Stuart into free fall.

At one point, during a conversation about semantics, Caroline says: “That's a dangerous game. Those words don't mean the same thing to me that they do to you.” Actually, it's not Caroline who's speaking at that moment, but Ms. Kidwell, whom we have just seen as an apparition out of a white man's fantasy: an erotic, all-succoring Mammy, singing “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

Sojourner! Sojourner!

That vignette (which I have described only partly) is mild compared with some of what follows. Role play turns out not to be confined to the classroom in “Underground Railroad Game,” which spirals in intricate and unsettling ways that bring to mind David Ives's sly study of theatrical pretense, “Venus in Fur.”

The production's first scene, in which the teachers act out a hokey vignette as a benevolent Quaker abolitionist and a runaway slave, is but a prelude to more elaborate offstage costume dramas in which Caroline and Stuart work out their feelings for each other. Or do I mean Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard?

The blurring of lines within the performances also dissolves the comfortable distance we feel between us and them. Many layers of artifice are at work in

“Underground Railroad Game,” and no sooner do we find our footing on one of them than it shifts to another. It could be argued, I suppose, that the play repeats the same points a tad too often. Yet it has such vivid diversity of presentation that it never seems monotonous.

I’ve tried to avoid too much specific description. (Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned the Mammy scene.) But I do feel a need to warn unsuspecting audience members that “Underground Railroad Game” manages to be, in the year 2016, shocking in ways that “Dutchman,” LeRoi Jones’s surreal 1964 play about a black man’s encounter with a white woman on a subway, must have been 50-some years ago.

A half-century later, you wouldn’t expect that to be possible. After all, much of what’s explored here is the stuff of television and screen comedy. We’ve turned stale and nasty old stereotypes into something to joke about, right?

Well, no. “Underground Railroad” insists that there is still no easy way to talk about the legacy of slavery. The smug and familiar humor with which this play hooks us winds up exploding in our faces, like a poisonous prank cigar.

Underground Railroad Game | NYT Critics’ Pick

Ars Nova 511 W. 54th St. Midtown West | 866-811-4111

Category Off Broadway, Comedy/Drama, Play

Runtime 1 hr. and 10 min.

Credits Written and performed by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard with Lighting Rod Special; Directed by Taibi Magar

Cast Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard

Opened September 13, 2016

Closing Date November 11, 2016

Upcoming Shows

Tuesday	November 8	7:00 PM
Wednesday	November 9	7:00 PM

Thursday

November 10

8:00 PM

Friday

November 11

8:00 PM

This information was last updated: Oct. 4, 2016

A version of this review appears in print on September 27, 2016, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Lesson on Slavery With Bite and No Mercy.

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LOVE IT

SAVE IT

Theater review: Race and romance go off the rails in Underground Railroad Game

Got a tip? Send it to tips@timeout.com (mailto:tips@timeout.com)

By Adam Feldman

Posted: Monday September 26 2016, 6:05pm



Photograph: Ben Arons



There's a hint of race war in the color war-style kids' game for which Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard's outrageously funny and discomfiting show is named. Kidwell, who is black, and Sheppard, who is white, play Caroline and Stuart, teachers at an elementary school just south of the Mason-Dixon Line. To get fifth graders jazzed about the Civil War—especially the “silver lining” of the Underground Railroad—they divide the

kids into gray and blue teams that get points for shuttling slave dolls to classroom “safehouses,” or for thwarting attempts to do so: “Each one of these slaves is an opportunity for you to score points for your team.”

"We don't learn our lessons; we live our lessons," says Stuart, and this motto is borne out as the relationship between the teachers spills into a romance fraught with awkwardness, guilt, fetishism, role play and rescue fantasy. In imaginative leaps of time and place, strikingly rendered by director Taibi Magar and her designers, the two share an elegant pas de deux to Sarah Vaughan's "Misty" and enact a fantasy in which he is a kind farmer and she a runaway slave; at one point, she appears in grand house-slave drag as he suckles at her nipple and then crawls beneath her giant skirt. The taboo-flouting script is matched by bold, smart performances from both actors. Although the play resists smugness, Stuart comes off worse than Caroline, perhaps because his motivations are clearer, and it is fascinating to how that plays out. At the performance I attended, the laughter and shock of the almost exclusively white audience had a tinge of self-flagellation, which felt gratifying—if not, as the play makes clear, necessarily liberating.

Ars Nova (Off Broadway (<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/off-broadway-shows-new-york-theater-reviews-tickets-and-listings>)).
By Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard. Directed by Taibi Magar. With Kidwell, Sheppard. Running time: 1hr 30mins. No intermission.
Through Nov 11. Click here (<https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/underground-railroad-game>) for full ticket and venue information.

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Adam reviews theater and cabaret for *Time Out New York* and is the president of the New York Drama Critics' Circle. Follow him on Twitter at @FeldmanAdam (<https://twitter.com/FeldmanAdam>).

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Arts and Entertainment

'Underground Railroad Game': Speaking race-relations truths

By **Peter Marks** October 7

NEW YORK — Sometimes on the theater beat, you imagine you've heard and seen it all. And then along comes an evening like "Underground Railroad Game."

This riveting, whip-smart performance piece, created by Philadelphia actors Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard, is as daringly unexpurgated as anything you'll encounter onstage today. It's an effort to reset the table for the complicated conversation about race that America eternally attempts to start, and always ends up recoiling from in guilt and insecurity and anger.

Actually, "reset" is too tame a characterization. What "Underground Railroad Game" does is flip the table over, tear the tablecloth to shreds and throw the dishes against the wall.

Kidwell and Sheppard remind us in this disturbing, discomfiting and disarming production — staged at off-Broadway's Ars Nova with a mischievous zeal by director Taibi Magar — that we're not even in the neighborhood of one nation under God. That we've never comprehensively and collectively undergone a reckoning with the toll of slavery and discrimination. And perhaps, one comes to feel, after 75 minutes of the play's scathing satire, we never will.

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“Underground Railroad Game” is a hall-of-mirrors excursion into the chasm that opens and closes and opens again between a pair of middle school teachers in suburban Pennsylvania, Kidwell’s Teacher Caroline and Sheppard’s Teacher Stuart. One imagines as the play begins that we’re in for a mock board-of-education-approved assembly, in which a pair of educators, one black, one white, addresses the audience as if we were a raucous group of preteens. The seeming topic is a state-sanctioned lesson on the Underground Railroad — the clandestine route by which enslaved people were helped to freedom by abolitionists — that will divide the students into two Civil War teams, one Blue, one Grey. The idea is they will participate in a weeks-long activity that simulates the railroad, with the goal of spirited to freedom, or returning to slavery, some dolls hidden around the school.

That the premise is based on Sheppard’s own experience as a student in a Pennsylvania school in which just such an exercise took place adds a patina of authenticity to the activity. But this is a “game” in a larger sense, for “Underground Railroad” is an ever-evolving experience, in which the production is always one step ahead of us. To describe the metamorphosis in detail would be to cheat potential ticket buyers out of the pleasure of the show’s cascading sense of surprise. Suffice to say that the relationship between Teacher Caroline and Teacher Stuart becomes sexually and then racially charged, with the resulting carnal encounters — including some so graphic they leave nothing to the imagination — managing to reveal how ingrained our biases and resentments remain.

Kidwell and Sheppard are equally magnetic here and yes, truly brave. Along with their savvy director and designers, they play enthrallingly with dynamite.

Underground Railroad Game, by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard.
Directed by Taibi Magar. Set, Steven Dufula; lighting, Oona Curley; sound,

Mikaal Sulaiman; fight choreography, Ryan Bourque; movement, David Neumann. About 75 minutes. Tickets, \$50. Through Nov. 11 at Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St., New York. Visit arsnovanyc.com.

Note: This version corrects an erroneous characterization of the experience Scott Sheppard had that inspired the play.

Peter Marks joined the Washington Post as its chief theater critic in 2002. Prior to that he worked for nine years at the New York Times, on the culture, metropolitan and national desks, and spent about four years as its off-Broadway drama critic.

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'Underground Railroad Game' Explores Race & History With an Edge

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ctors Scott Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell created and star in the off-Broadway comedy, "Underground Railroad Game," at Ars Nova .

(Photo by Ben Arons)

Oct 24, 2016

Scott Sheppard and **Jennifer Kidwell** created and star in the off-Broadway comedy, "

http://arsnovanyc.com/underground_railroad_game at Ars Nova which *The New York Times* described as "a lacerating comedy on race."

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/theater/underground-railroad-game-review.html?_r=0 Sheppard and Kidwell star as "Teacher Stuart" and "Teacher Caroline" who decide to play an adventurous history lesson game with their fifth-grade students in Hanover, Pa.

"Underground Railroad Game" is at Ars Nova (511 West 54th Street) through November

11th. Visit their [website <http://arsnovanyc.com/underground_railroad_game>](http://arsnovanyc.com/underground_railroad_game) for tickets and show information.

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THEATRE IS EASY



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Underground Railroad Game

By Jennifer Kidwell & Scott Sheppard with Lightning Rod Special;
Directed by Taibi Magar

Off Broadway, Play
Extended through 11.11.16
Ars Nova, 511 West 54th Street

by *Ran Xia (whoweare.php)* on 9.26.16





Scott Sheppard and Jennifer Kitwell in *Underground Railroad Game*. Photo by Ben Arons.

BOTTOM LINE: An "R-rated, kaleidoscopic, and fearless comedy" exploring the tug-of-war in our nation's history on slavery and other racial issues through the scope of a classroom game.

It's a classroom game for fifth graders; it's waltz of sex and violence; it's a challenge extended to the audience to rethink their inheritance of this nation's past. *Underground Railroad Game* starts in a dimly lit barn, where an encounter between an escaped slave, Caroline (Jennifer Kidwell), and a Quaker abolitionist, Stuart (Scott Sheppard) takes place. After the deliberately melodramatic enactment of the Civil War-era skit is abruptly interrupted with a sharp lighting shift, it is revealed then that the play actually takes place present day at Hanover Middle School. The audience is transformed into the fifth-grade student body, and are split into the two opposing sides of the Civil War to participate in a game of Underground Railroad.

The game, as a matter of fact, is the real life inspiration for the play. The Civil War thematic unit was part of co-creator/performer Scott Sheppard's own fifth-grade experience, which involved the students' temporary immersion in what he calls "a pedagogical extravaganza" as teachers "flexed and strained their creative muscles to get even the lazies and troublemakers excited about learning." His class was divided into the two warring factions, Confederate Soldiers and Union Soldiers: "We would wage a civil war of learning, rewriting history as we explored it." Each side would receive points for their military strategy, and one of the key point-scoring exercises was the Underground Railroad Game, in which each side had to either secure or impede the passage of two black dolls through cardboard boxes marked SAFEHOUSE, one in each classroom. According to Sheppard, "Union students would get five points for every new SAFEHOUSE that a doll reached safely, and if a slave made it to every box, he/she became a free person, crossing into a symbolic Canada," which for Sheppard's school was the hallway trophy display case.

The play faithfully preserves the real-life elements of the game. As the teachers, Caroline and Stuart, guide their students backwards in time into our nation's most violent hours, their own personal turmoil unfolds. The duo go from awkwardly resisting their sexual desire for each other, to the development of a romance, to a climactic struggle to overpower each other in humiliation and terror. The linear narrative of present day Caroline and Stuart is juxtaposed with the historical subplot, as abolitionist Stuart and slave Caroline abscond to a fictional Canada using the underground railroad system. A third layer of the play is the surrealistic emotional states of present-day Caroline and Stuart. For instance, when they are first developing feelings for each other, the actors break into a dance sequence as time stands still.

The show is billed as an “R-rated, kaleidoscopic, and fearless comedy.” Those five words hit all the marks and there’s really no better way to describe this production. It is indeed a feast of various styles of storytelling, keeping audience members on the edge of their seats as the play snaps between its different aspects like a well-conducted orchestra, all the while challenging you to look into the depth of our nation’s history. The play unloads one surprise after another, like a firework that continuously explodes into different colors and shapes, and pulls its audiences into the fate of the protagonists in a whirlwind of turmoil. Caroline and Stuart, representing their respective races, tackle the baggage inherited from their ancestors. Their multi-layered romantic relationship becomes a metaphor for the turbulent and sometimes misinformed racial relationship in America.

Besides the masterful performances by Kidwell and Sheppard, Steven Dufala creates a suitable set using cardboard pieces to build a reality that’s both imaginary and historical. Oona Curley's lighting design complements the set and transforms the cardboard barn into both the realistic historical space, and the product of schoolroom arts and crafts. Mikael Sulaiman uses romantic music that borders on cheesy to establish the surreal moments between the protagonists, as the overwhelming, tantalizing, disturbing, almost warlike, and utterly magnetic attraction forms between them.

It takes courage to create a play like *Underground Railroad Game*. The *Inception*-like layers of the plot do not sacrifice clarity, as the message of the play is relevant to all. It is anchored at a place of universal understanding, and comes out like wildfire. The play is uniquely American, yet at its core, it is about a tug-of-war between two sides, no matter what cardboard barn we put our dolls in.

(*Underground Railroad Game* plays at Ars Nova, 511 West 54th Street, through November 11, 2016. The running time is 1 hour 10 minutes without an intermission. Performances are Monday through Wednesday at 7, Thursday through Saturday at 8, and select Saturdays at 3. Tickets are \$35 and are available at **arsnovanyc.com** (<http://www.arsnovanyc.com>) or by calling 212-352-3101.)

***Underground Railroad Game* is by Jennifer Kidwell & Scott Sheppard with Lightning Rod Special. Directed by Taibi Magar. Production Design is by Tilly Grimes. Scenic Design is by Steven Dufala. Lighting Design is by Oona Curley. Sound Design is by Mikael Sulaiman.**

**Fight Choreography is by Ryan Bourque. Movement Consultant is David Neumann.
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The cast is Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard.

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Let's Play the 'Underground Railroad Game'

By ELIZA BENT

Using outrageous satire to root through America's past

If laughter is the sound of surprise, then there were many surprises the night I saw [Underground Railroad Game](#), playing at Ars Nova through October 29. But one laugh in particular keeps bouncing around my head.

In the piece -- which was created by its stars, Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard -- Teacher Caroline and Teacher Stuart are on a date. We've seen them awkwardly corral a roomful of fifth graders (the audience becomes the students), but now they're strolling along a street sipping supersize sodas. Their flirtation begins harmlessly enough, but soon their quips become outrageous.

"I can imagine you behind a giant oak desk," says Teacher Caroline (Kidwell), a smile across her face. "Bent over it, pants pooled around your ankles while a bored prostitute lazily [stimulates you] with your own paperweight. You're crying salty tears into a glass of single malt scotch and wondering how it all...slipped away." When I saw the show, this outré image, along with Kidwell's pitch-perfect delivery and [the beat](#) that followed, got a huge laugh. The actors waited to continue, but as the room grew quiet, an audience member said, with equal parts despair and deadpan irony, "Oh my God." At this, even louder laughter erupted, and once again the actors patiently waited for the noise to subside before continuing with the scene.

To me this moment captures the essence of *Underground Railroad Game*, a play that is so dangerously and delightfully layered that it constantly reinvents itself, shape-shifting from scene to scene, while also asking audiences to decide if and when laughter is acceptable.



Scott Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell in 'Underground Railroad Game'

Yet for all its extremes, the show is based on true events. A teaching unit in Sheppard's fifth grade class in Hanover, PA -- a stone's throw from Gettysburg -- involved dividing students into two armies, Union and Confederate. Their task was to move dolls from box to box in an approximation of the Underground Railroad, and whichever army won more points also "won" the war. This story, along with an Antebellum tale and a type of romance between the teachers, is grafted onto show, which Kidwell and Sheppard began creating in 2013.

"The initial provocation was the fact that I had played this game at my school," says Sheppard. "From there it got us thinking about other bizarre objectification traps and hypocrisies in the American narrative of slavery; these very forgiving and romanticized tropes and clichés that persist in the narrative around slavery. So we started to expand the thinking beyond just the game, but it still revolves around the teachers and the students."

Another initial impulse came when the duo, who met when they were students in [Pig Iron](#)'s first class for Advanced Performance Training in 2011, attended a lecture about the Underground Railroad at Philadelphia's National Portrait Gallery. The lecturer, a white man, kept getting tripped up on language. "At first he was using 'Negro' in a historical way, then he'd switch to 'black person' then it'd be 'African-American,'" Kidwell recalls. "It was amazingly awkward."

"I think humor allows us to hear and claim truths in a way."



Scott Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell in 'Underground Railroad Game'

Philadelphia's rich history felt ripe for theatricalizing and satirizing, and from scene to scene Kidwell and Sheppard alternately portray the awkward teachers, Antebellum characters, themselves, and old-timey Hollywood stereotypes. Within these characters Kidwell and Sheppard delve into tropes such as the "magical Negro" and the "white savior." "[We want to] explore the pervasive psychologies that these tropes create," Kidwell says.

Race is never *not* topical, but Kidwell and Sheppard are quick to point out how in the three years since they began developing *Underground Railroad Game*, the country's attention to race has heightened. But neither artist wants to make didactic proclamations. Rather, they dig into the mess of history to ask thorny questions. Who is allowed to laugh at what? And when? Are we reveling in our past or are we learning from it? Can objectification be a tool for empowerment or is it always a tool for control?

"I think humor allows us to hear and claim truths in a way," says Kidwell. "We gain access because humor touches on pleasure points and it does it in the most honest way possible. In some ways when something is funny, you hear it twice. It pleases you and it's fun, but it sticks with you because it's also true."

The man who said "Oh my God" was sitting close to me, and I watched him throughout the performance. He wasn't laughing, but then laughter isn't Kidwell and Sheppard's only aim. "We're trying to present the truth as we see it," says Kidwell. "Maybe that's funny and maybe it's not."

Sheppard adds, "We're using a dark and twisted comedy that moves from harmless to harmful on a dime and in ways that are difficult for people to process, but can be helpful in terms of its ability to disorient."

I was certainly disoriented after the show. I left the theatre dizzy from the layers of history, but also giddy from the serious clownery on hand and the bold exploration of America's past and present.

Writer and performer **Eliza Bent** is a regular contributor to *TDF Stages*.

Photos by Ben Arons. Top photo: Scott Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell.

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THE BLOG

First Nighter: Ars Nova's "Underground Railroad Game" Perhaps More Gamey Than Game

🕒 09/27/2016 11:26 am ET



David Finkle

Writer, Drama Critic

Since whether we want to or not, we seem to be living in Donald J. Trump's world, we may have just been handed the production we deserve. It's called *Underground Railroad Game* and has checked in at Ars Nova. Not that the creators Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard intended such a worrisome result.

They have what is an admirable purpose in mind and base it on a fifth-grade exercise Sheppard underwent as part of a teacher's approach to educate her charges in the Civil War. She divided the class into two groups--Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers--and had the former group attempt to move runaway slaves above the Mason-Dixon line and had the latter group capture the fugitives and return them to their owners. Along the way those fleeing were able to escape being caught when they reached so-called safe houses.

Sheppard and Kidwell apparently look askance at the creative teaching aid, but perhaps it wasn't such an objectionable way to instigate interest in history among the young. These days, some might suggest that bringing students to a hip-hop musical as a method of firing imaginations sounds questionable, too. Yet Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* may be the single most important motivation we now have for a revival of interest in studying history.

For their part, Kidwell and Sheppard have shaped a 75-minute piece taking on the pernicious persistence of racism in American culture and the unending degradation in which it results. To be sure, they earn appreciative nods for that at a time when headlines ballyhooing shootings in cities across country and responses to them attest to the validity of the thesis.

It's the way they go about addressing the problem that might raise the hackles of many spectators. (N.B.: Revealing them in this review probably qualifies as an extended spoiler, so proceed--or not--accordingly.) For a script that lurches between and among many twists, Kidwell and Sheppard begin when she, as an escaping slave in shabby Civil war dress, sneaks into a barn owned by an abolitionist, whom he plays.

Enacting this scene for a few introductory minutes, they suddenly shed their

period dress to explain that they're really present to facilitate a learn-about-the-Civil-War-game in which the audience will be divided in two (determined by the color of the small plastic soldiers they find under their seats.)

Depending on the tally each side then acquires while moving dolls representing Union soldiers, Confederate soldiers or slaves, an eventual winning side will be announced.

For those having read directly above--or simply have taken in the *Underground Railroad Game* title--and think the enterprise is an immersive, audience-participation event, there's no reason to tremble. From then on, Kidwell and Sheppard assume the roles of, respectively, Teacher Caroline and Teacher Stuart of the Hanover, Pennsylvania Middle School faculty.

They speak to--and sometimes chastise--the audience when not stepping into scenes meant to illustrate the base behavior to which continually rampant racism descends. Not a few of the pop-up sequences are hardly what any board of education would allow, no matter how liberal. But that objection is neither here nor there, as Kidwell and Sheppard have patently designed things for a mature(?) audience.

Along the way, Sheppard becomes outraged at the audience-as-students while holding up a sign that specifies a Safeway house on which someone in the "class" has written "niggerlover." At one point, the frequently drawn curtains open on Tilly Grimes and Steven Dufala's adaptable set to reveal Kidwell standing sideways in an exaggerated Civil War outfit. In no time, Sheppard, worshipping her, has removed her bodice and is suckling her breasts. That's until he clambers under the skirt supposedly to suckle her elsewhere. At another point, Kidwell as a type of auctioneer humiliates Sheppard, representing a slave on auction, by having him strip naked and endure her swiping him with a long ruler.

Yes, Kidwell and Sheppard make their overall engagé point. They make it with such vigor and conviction that it occurred to me some audience members might be thinking how brilliant the folderol was. Later, I read the promotion material provided to the press and found a confirming quote from a Philadelphia critic who labeled the production--developed by the local Lightning Rod Special Company and directed by Taibi Magar--a "brilliant theatrical commentary on contemporary race relations."

I leave it to those who adamantly consider *Underground Railroad Game* brilliant to describe at greater length its brilliance. As for me, I believe there's a thin line between commenting on vulgarity and being straightforwardly vulgar. In the instance of *Underground Railroad Game*, I'm convinced the line has been crossed from comment-on to example-of.

Kidwell and Sheppard are aware of the possibility. In "A Note From the Creators," they indicate their concern. They write--just wait for the highfalutin phrase "interrogate the mythos" and the highfalutin word "narrativize,"--"If we interrogate the mythos of the Underground Railroad we uncover an apparent need to make systemic exploitation, degradation and objectification

palatable. Why is it that we love to narrativize ourselves in ways that propagate the very violence we proclaim to upend?" Why, indeed?

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Published 27 September 2016

Review: Underground Railroad Game at Ars Nova

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Molly Grogan goes back to middle school to find that history keeps repeating.

MOLLY GROGAN

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History teachers in the house!

When Scott Sheppard was in middle school outside Gettysburg, PA, his class participated in one of those wrong-from-the-start teaching exercises that indelibly mark our formative years. This was the “Underground Railroad Game” – an oxymoron for sure – whose purpose

was to give preteens the opportunity to defend or rewrite history as soldiers in the Union and Confederate Armies, as they tried to save or capture as many “slave” dolls their history teacher could hide throughout the school. The premise is utterly ridiculous (what exactly

were the anticipated learning outcomes?), and the experience probably became notorious among students as that crazy dumb role-playing thing you had to do during lunch period.

But here we are in 2016: 15 decades after the Civil War, 48 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, 24 months after Ferguson, MO, 1 week after Charlotte, NC, and 3 days after the opening of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. If you live in the US, you are either participating in the “race conversation” or avoiding it. Sheppard, who is now an actor, and actress Jennifer Kidwell are having that conversation in their show, a re-enactment of the Underground Railroad Game of years ago. And this time, there are real benefits to take away.

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Because when I say they’re “having the conversation,” I’m not just repeating a well-worn catchphrase. I mean they are really sifting through the speech we use, black and white, to talk about ourselves and each other in this country founded on the principle that all men are created equal but

enriched by slavery, having fought the deadliest war in its history to end that practice but still struggling with its seemingly ineradicable socioeconomic consequences that are erupting, again, into violence. And they are using all the languages we humans have at our disposal: physical, intellectual, rational, emotional. They’re testing words and ideas, they’re getting frustrated, they’re trying to understand, they’re in love one minute, they’re screaming and fighting the next. The tension can be thick enough to cut with a knife and the energy white hot.

Sheppard and Kidwell play Teacher Stuart and Teacher Caroline, respectively. One is a lanky, dimpled white guy who always looks comfortable in relaxed denim and wears his Confederate hat like a natural. The other is a small, muscular African-American woman, whose suits and pumps clash terribly with her Union hat. Neither is the simple sum of his or her parts, but neither is this show, whose ostensible lesson about the efforts of a Quaker man to help an enslaved woman escape from the South, goes neck-deep into the roiling waters of semantics when these two become romantically involved.

But if Stuart and Caroline are tempted to think that their interracial couple could be an example to anyone observing, they'll be proved wrong. In one particular scene, after Stuart has, shall I say, drunk at the source of Caroline's power over him, he wonders, as perhaps history teachers do, if their lives have "advanced history." His tone is self-congratulatory. It meets with her outright disdain. In another scene, Caroline and Stuart begin to engage in a sex game but when she forces Stuart to stand naked on a box in front of us, it suddenly becomes the humiliating public auction of a slave, his physical parts closely examined and factored into the price.

At the same time, the writing is consistently, searingly funny, especially when it reveals exactly what the characters most want to hide. Soon every tableaux and phrase looks or sounds like a double entendre. Despite the pretext of the "game," Sheppard and Kidwell work on many registers, so that you have to watch and listen very carefully – "with your thinking cap on," as teachers like to say – to catch all their meanings (and I'm not sure that I did).

The form is far simpler than the content. We're in a school auditorium prepared with a cardboard wall / barn door for the historical re-enactment part of the lesson. There, after being divided into teams, we will learn the rules, watch as the teachers enact some choice scenes in their fictional narrative and receive updates on our progress (dolls caught or rescued = points earned). The premise is effective for building our engagement in the story as we get high-fived by Teacher Stuart, scolded by Teacher Caroline and prompted to yell out the school's fight motto (though that's as far as the interaction goes). The real learning comes when, as their "students," we start to stare, even gape sometimes, as the adults try and fail in this war of words, shared and disputed histories, deliberate and unintentional offenses, real and imagined fears, to be together or maybe only reach détente.

Sheppard may have been handed the idea by his middle school teacher, but he and Kidwell make this *Underground Railroad Game* a guide to the times we are living in. The lessons have to be teased out, from the hagiography of our "heroic" past to white guilt, but unlike Sheppard's history class, this "Game" is more powerful for not trying to be anything more than what it is: in this case, that all-important conversation, in big, bold strokes. A+ for ideas, effort and for making us laugh, cathartically, all the better to reflect and learn.

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MOLLY GROGAN

Molly came to theater through a passion for oral literature from places as diverse as Ireland, West Africa and the Caribbean. She moved to New York City in 2011 from Paris, where she was the theater critic for *The Paris Voice* for 20 years and wrote a blog on European theater and performance. She is a member of the French Society of Theater Critics. An academic by training, she holds a Doctorate in Francophone Literature and a Masters in Linguistics from the University of Paris and has

lectured, researched and published principally on the topic of postcolonial and nomadic identities. Some of her favorite theater celebrity moments include interviewing Marcel Marceau, sharing a library table with Robert Wilson at the Sorbonne and stealing a photo of Robert Lepage walking at sunset in Greece. She has written for The Village Voice, American Theater, and the French blog Les Trois Coups and works as a literary translator.

Read more articles by Molly Grogan

Review: Underground Railroad Game at Ars Nova Show Info

DIRECTED BY Taibi Magar

WRITTEN BY Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard

CAST INCLUDES Jennifer Kidwell, Scott Sheppard

LINK [Ars Nova](#)

RUNNING TIME 75 minutes, no intermission

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