



by Robert Wood

So Many John Henrys

It's been said that you can never sing a folk song twice. Folk songs are living organisms, not reproducible objects, the argument goes, existing to perpetually renew the contract between universal myths and the gritty particulars of our lives. Sometimes, because songs migrate and the oral tradition gets creative, those particulars work their way into the songs themselves and variations proliferate. A Scottish glen becomes a Virginia holler, a silver dagger becomes a pen knife, rosy-red lips become lily-white hands. The details change so that the myths don't have to.

Such is the case with the "The Ballad of John Henry," whose 200+ documented versions form the basis of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Julia Wolfe's work *Steel Hammer* and its theatrical adaptation, which comes to BAM in December. The story of John Henry is a familiar one: a spike-driving railroad worker of Bunyonesque strength beats a steam drill in a contest to bore through a mountain, only to "die with his hammer in his hands." That folk music historian Alan Lomax called the legend "possibly America's greatest piece of folklore" is no wonder: the mythos of the railroad, man vs. machine anxiety, bootstraps individualism—the muscular American imaginary is there in its entirety.

But the details are predictably fuzzy. Was John Henry 5'1" or 6'1"? Was his wife Polly Ann or Sally Ann? Did his hammer shine like silver or gold?

Wolfe's answer, according to her libretto, is yes. A patchwork of juxtaposed nouns and adjectives plucked from the story's myriad variants, her libretto celebrates proliferation and pluralism—an American crazy quilt of contested, telephone-gamed fact. On stage, four female vocalists take on the role of stoic Appalachian balladeers, impassively conveying the ballad's litany of discrepancies. Through an acerbic post-minimalism, fleshed out by banjos, jaw harps, guitars, and other instruments played by the Bang on a Can All-Stars, they repeat, foreshorten, and linger over phrases as though trying on the variants for size.

Words have become raw material, stripped of context. And if folklore typically relies on archetypes to work properly—the Trickster, however tricky, the Tragic Hero, however tragic—then this is its radical inversion: a hypnotic celebration of content over narrative form in service of a bustling musical machine.

The more traditional storytelling in *Steel Hammer* falls to six actors from Anne Bogart's SITI Company, who, along with step dancing and other choreography (by Barney O'Hanlon), offer theatrical interludes between musical movements. Yet in keeping with Wolfe's oblique approach to the tale, the interludes take an alternative path as well. Using different texts written by playwrights Kia Corthron, Regina Taylor, Carl Hancock Rux, and Will Power—each of whom was tasked with telling the John Henry tale in their own idiosyncratic ways—the actors delve into the John Henry subconscious.

Myths repress, after all. We often can romanticize them only because their gritty preconditions are kept out of sight. In the case of John Henry, always portrayed as African-American, those givens are inescapably linked to race. How, after all, did John Henry end up working on the railroad in the first place? What would lead a person to fight for his job to the point of exhausting himself to death?

In *Steel Hammer's* first segment, a subtle contest of representation plays out. A group of largely white town folk take turns recounting the legend with wide-eyed wonder before another woman, referencing historical likelihood, tempers their story: John Henry worked the railroads as a

prison laborer who'd been falsely convicted. Foundational myth had been built on the back of the oppressed.

In another segment, a woman recalls meeting Henry at the age of 12 while he worked as a pig slaughterer in the post-reconstruction south. Conditions were dire for blacks ("sanitation was an unuttered idea"), she reminds the audience, and Henry, out of breath, seemed to be on the run from something. "Every man is an end in himself," Henry says to her in passing, his days of freedom presumably numbered. The stream drill is rendered as one foe among many.

In another, John Henry is in jail with no release date in sight. What will we tell our kids?, he wonders through the bars to his wife. Their solution: an unlikely tale about how their father died while at his railroad job, but not before beating the odds in a contest with a machine.

"For me," Anne Bogart has said, "this project is not about getting to the absolute truth of this tale. It's about how we mold stories for the times we live in."

The details change, and yet our myths live on.

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