

The Oregonian

Theater review One-woman show evokes abolition era Multimedia – Susan Banyas' "No Strangers Here Today" details the Underground Railroad

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The Underground Railroad, as Portlander Susan Banyas saw it in her childhood imagination, really was an underground railroad. Trains carried slaves north, from below the Mason-Dixon line beneath the Mason-Dixon line, whereupon they disembarked with a happy wave "hello," ready to start their new, free lives.

Of course, the operations of that famous covert rescue network weren't so simple or so cheery: They were fraught with uncertainty and mortal danger.

"Every family has a legacy of sorrow," Banyas says early in "No Strangers Here Today," her stirring multimedia examination of the American abolition movement and the Quaker-rooted ethics behind it. The show played last weekend at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center.

It is through her own family legacy -- albeit one more admirable than sorrowful -- that Banyas comes to a fuller understanding of the Underground Railroad and how it might relate to current moral and political issues.

Her method is fitting for material that turns on the power of individual consciousness. She's not quite alone onstage: Musician David Ornette Cherry, switching between a keyboard and an Apple laptop, provides spare piano meditations reminiscent of Harold Budd, beat-enhanced African chants and other atmospheric accompaniment. But the focus is on Banyas, who combines gesture, dance and a text woven from personal recollection, historical research and the fascinating coded language of her great-great grandmother's antebellum diary.

For instance, talking of family car trips in her childhood, her hands trace a winding path for country roads, mime the driver's steering and smoking, then indicate the outline of a map of the Eastern seaboard. Later, to illustrate the contradictions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, she teeters on one leg, torso twisting and arms waving, like a tightrope walker struggling to regain balance. Sometimes her movements are inscrutable, but never enough so to derail the fascinating story she has to tell.

The diary of Banyas' great-great-grandmother, who lived in the free territory of southern Ohio, suggests that the family farm may have been a way station for escaping

slaves, and Banyas wonders about the possibility that the slave fictionalized as Eliza in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" might have passed that way.

Banyas fleshes out the context of this family history with short explications of Quaker pacifism (" . . . war is incompatible with the Christian spirit"), the rise of King Cotton, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.

It's a stirring portrait of abolitionist effort, and illuminating morally and historically (even if Banyas confuses the notions of civil rights and civil liberties with regard to slave law in the South and gives the bitter failure of Reconstruction barely a perfunctory mention).

The connection she makes, near the end, to the Iraq war, however, seems forced. "Be stirred by the spirit of history," she quotes a contemporary congressman. However worthy that advice might be, Banyas suggests a moral equivalence between slavery and international intervention, which is neither logically obvious nor explicitly argued here.