

Good Old American Music?

Todd Barton creates *African Company* soundscape BY SUZI STEFFEN

Picture the sounds of New York, circa 1821: cows, pigs, horses, carriages, boots glopping through mud and water. Tony white folks play Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann as their servants, including a few last N.Y. slaves and a lot of free blacks, perform their labor. In the evenings, some of the African-Americans will travel to the African Grove, a theater company founded by blacks, for blacks, with black actors and directors, costume designers and scene painters.

When Todd Barton, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's resident composer, started to imagine creating the sounds of the African Grove for the OSF's *The African Company Presents Richard III*, he found himself a bit stumped.

"White culture was just totally appropriated from Europe," he says. "Likewise, the Africans had brought their own music, which was of the djembe and the talking drum."

The mostly West African slaves of the U.S. and the Caribbean, and their descendants, including many of New York's free men and women, used the talking drum to communicate. That drum originated, probably, within the Ghana Empire. The djembe, or jembe, meanwhile, might have originated within the Mali Empire, and it's got a deeper voice. Carlyle Brown's script for *The African Company Presents Richard III* calls for both kinds of drums, so Barton knew he needed to write music for them.

The character of Papa Shakespeare, played by Charles Robinson, had been a griot both in West Africa and in the islands before he arrived in the U.S., and he carries his talking drum with him to help translate meaning from one group to another. "I imagined a talking drum in New York in the 1820s was possibly a novelty, possibly unusual," Barton says.

As he researched the sounds, he also learned that it's likely Africans brought the banjer or banza – aka the banjo – first to the Caribbean islands and then the U.S. "We were going to use one in the play, but it's too cumbersome," he says. "It's a huge gourd with skin."

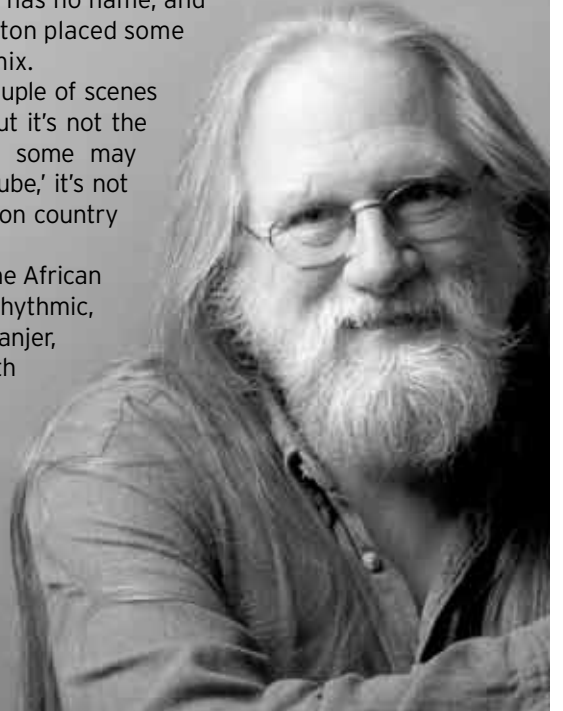
Instead of having a character play the banjer, Barton plays the instrument himself, mixed with a drum sample set, for the music under scenes between Jimmy Hewlett (Kevin Kenerly) and Ann Johnson (Tiffany Rachelle Stewart).

For the white impresario Stephen Price (Michael Elich), who strongly believes that he is a cultured, important man, Barton used opera, which contemporary U.S. audiences may interpret as a bit stuffy or snobby, and for the Irish constable (who has no name, and is played by Mark Murphey), Barton placed some subtle Irish fiddle music in the mix.

He also wrote a waltz for a couple of scenes involving Sarah (Gina Daniels), but it's not the kind of late 19th-century waltz some may think of – "it's not the 'Blue Danube,' it's not Strauss," he says. "This is based on country dances."

Barton needed to show that the African traditions of music, including the rhythmic, deep djembe and the stringed banjer, met and sometimes clashed with European traditions, both folk and classical. He says that writing the music was actually not so hard, considering that much of the script contains cues for this clash.

"The juxtaposition of these two major cultures, that was the point for me, musically," Barton says.



Lost Times, Claimed Places

The Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the U.S. Civil War began in 1861, and between those two times African-Americans lived in a patchwork of ways, slowly being freed in the Northern states or slowly being pulled into deeper and more horrifying networks of harm in the cotton-growing Southern states. In New York – where the slave trade was banned in 1788 and slavery was gradually abolished in the state itself – free blacks born in the Colonies or the new United States mixed with former Caribbean islanders. What did those African-Americans, many of whom worked as servants for the middle- and upper-class whites of the burgeoning town, do for fun?

One thing they did was form a company to present some of the plays of Shakespeare, as OSF's *The African Company Presents Richard III* attests. Set in 1821, the play by Carlyle Brown depicts a clash of cultures, a time in which the African

Company (a real historical entity, founded by one William Brown, played by Peter Macon in this production) and an upper-crust white playhouse, run by Stephen Price (Michael Elich), plan to present *Richard III* on the same night.

To the thin plot of Billy Brown vs. Stephen Price the playwright adds a frustrated love story between Ann Johnson (Tiffany Rachelle Stewart) and Jimmy Hewlett (Kevin Kenerly), but at the moral center of the African Company are Papa Shakespeare (Charles Robinson) and Sarah (Gina Daniels). One scene with those two is better than most of the rest of the play which, however important it is – and oh, it is important – plods along with the outcome assured. The final scene, however, does suggest something wonderful: Out of the ashes of denial, new talent will rise, new tales will emerge, and free blacks will write their own way into history.

The African Company Presents Richard III runs through Nov. 5 at the Bowmer Theatre. – Suzi Steffen