

'Blue Train' a'comin

Choreographer finds treasure in Lincoln's railroad history

BY CINDY LANGE-KUBICK
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"There's a long blue train pushing cross the land there's a blue train bringing friend and foe..." — composer John King

A long, low train whistle blows in with the breeze to the third floor of the Wagon Train Project. Metal wheels grind and echo as actor Patrick Tuttle revisits the days of steam engines while others move on stage, mimicking the movement of the engine's gears.

Out in the hallway, Park Middle School students keep rhythm with a pair of New York City dancers. Downstairs Annette Murrell belts out a bluesy tune and members of the Native American Rough Riders beat a communal drum.

This is "Blue Train" in the making, the first offering in this season's New Theater Festival; the inaugural event on the renovated Wagon Train stage; and a true community effort.

The original dance-theater work, by New York

choreographer Martha Bowers and composer John King, runs Thursday through next Sunday at the Wagon Train Project Performance Loft, 512 So. 7th St.



BOWERS

After visiting the Wagon Train Project in the summer of 1994, Bowers said she was struck by how deeply Lincoln was infused with the sights and sounds of the railroad.

"The first time I came to Lincoln it was hot — really hot. I stayed in the Wagon Train offices and through the open windows I heard the trains coming and going all night. In fact, wherever I went in Lincoln I could hear the trains," Bowers said.

"In Brooklyn you see the sea, smell it, hear it. The trains are to

The trains are to Lincoln as the sea is to a port town like New York, completely intertwined with its history, its people and the fabric of life.

— Martha Bowers, choreographer

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Funding from several grants allowed Bowers to immerse herself in railroad history and bring forth her vision of celebration and reflection.

"The thrust of the piece is to reflect on the railroad from many view points and different cultures — it's not simply a celebration of the men and women who built the railroad," Bowers said.

The symbolism of the piece's opening reflects the diversity

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Bowers intends for the work — the figure of a buffalo slowly gets smaller and is replaced by the expanding image of a locomotive.

For pioneers, the railroad opened up a whole new way of life: for Native Americans the "Iron Horse" symbolized the end of one.

Bowers has spent much of the last two years learning about the railroad — reading books, including the autobiographies of early hoboes, and studying historical accounts.

And with each trip to Lincoln, Bowers made it a point to attend a Wednesday morning breakfast of retirees that includes a host of railroad workers.

Over sweet rolls and coffee she listened to stories of the tracks, learning of the prideworkers had in their jobs, their brushes with death and the bygone era of hand signaling and lantern talk.

One man, Ralph Bauers, shared countless stories of his almost 50 years on the railroad. Some of his stories will be played during the show.

"Blue Train" chugs along with Murrell singing gospel from the top of a box car, a group of modern dancers, senior citizens from the Readers Theater Group narrating stories, fancy shawl dancers, a slide show of railroad history, children singing, hobos around a bonfire (yes, the event moves outside); and lanterns waving in the dark.

Pulling the cast together was the result of hard work and serendipity.

John King, another New Yorker, is the musical director, composer and lyricist of "Blue Train." During a visit to a local pawn shop to scout out musical memorabilia, King found musician Jared Alberico, who will play guitar and accordion.

Bowers came across a wealth of railroad history when Harold Jones, a railroad buff from Crete, mentioned he had interesting artifacts.

"I spent the most interesting day of my life out there," Bowers said of a trip to Jones' farm.

Those experiences and bringing together community members make up the core of Bowers' work.

Her production company, Dance/Theater/Etcetera, has a reputation for working with communities to re-create and commemorate events that bring meaning to place.

Her piece "On the Waterfront" took an audience into the piers of Brooklyn where a fourth-generation hooker, a group of P.S. 15 schoolchildren and dozens of musicians and dancers told the story of the neighborhood.

A review of her "Root and Branch," a performance project for fathers and sons, said "Considering that Bowers wasn't working with professionals, she achieved wonders and left us wishing that others would take on similar enterprises."

It's happening in "Blue Train." In a cast full of real people, Bowers has found a treasure of experiences.