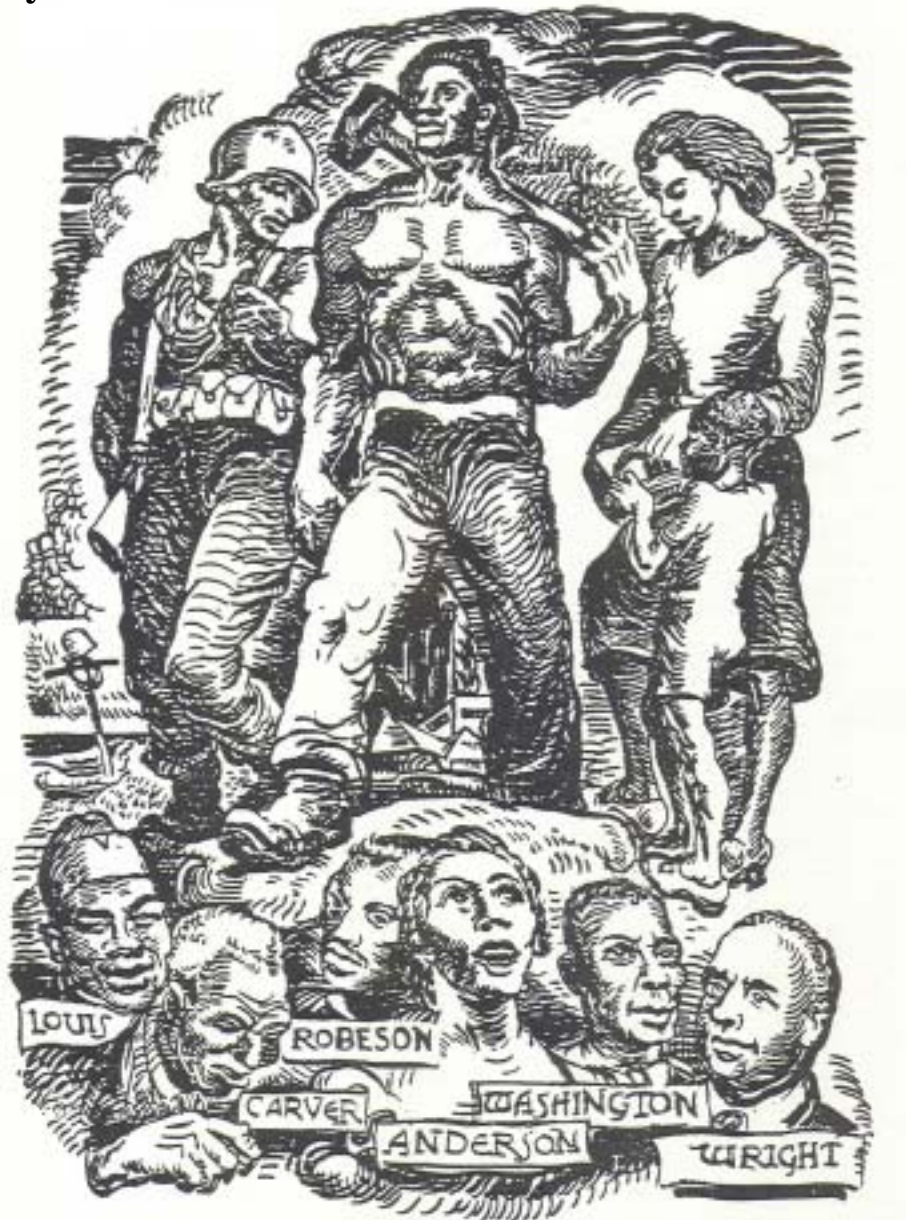


Mad River
Theater Works

JOHN HENRY

Study Guide



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and the Ohio Arts Council.



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About the Company

Mad River Theater Works is a professional touring theater company based in West Liberty, Ohio. Our purpose is to craft plays that are both drawn from and produced for the people of the farms and small towns of rural America, and to communicate the concerns and insights of our communities to people everywhere. Since 1978 we have collected stories, molded this material into plays, and performed our work at community centers, schools, colleges, and theaters throughout the Eastern United States reaching an annual audience of over 40,000 through over 125 performances.

Mad River Theater Works is one of only a handful of professional theaters in the United States based in rural communities. Our unique mission has attracted the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as foundations, corporations, and individuals.



Special Support

Mad River Theater Works is particularly grateful for the generous ongoing support of Honda of America, Manufacturing. Honda has been the primary sponsor of the school touring programs of Mad River Theater Works for the past seven years. Their assistance has made this program possible.

The Artists

Jeff Hooper (Writer, Director) is the founding director of Mad River Theater Works. Jeff has worked at Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, Arena Stage in Washington DC, Berkeley Stage Company in Berkeley, California and with Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky. He was also a founding director of the Half Moon Theater in London, England. Jeff pioneered techniques of combining storytelling with drama and music to produce lively original works for the stage. *John Henry* is the most recent play developed by Jeff for Mad River. Other plays written for Mad River include *Freedom Bound*, *Black Hats*, *The Return of Kate Shelley*, *Riverboatin'*, and *Coming of Age*. Jeff also collaborated with Native American Poet Lance Henson to create *Cry of the Americas* and *Coyote Road* and directed the premiere of John Olive's *Evelyn and the Polka King* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1992. Jeff was recently commissioned to write a new play for the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, where his play *Freedom Bound* was produced in 1995. Jeff was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Playwriting Fellowship in 1989-90 and has served on numerous panels for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council, and the Florida Arts Commission.

Bob Lucas (Composer, Master Boots, McGregor, Captain, other roles) comes from a singing family tradition. He is a rhythm guitarist, banjo player, old time fiddler and has a rich tenor voice, spanning over three octaves. As a composer and lyricist with Mad River Theater Works, he has collaborated with playwright Jeff Hooper to create *Freedom Bound*, *Black Hats*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Evelyn and the Polka King* and has acted as musical director and performed in those plays and many others. Bob was music director and performed in *Evelyn and the Polka King* at Actors Theater of Louisville, Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, and City Theatre in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Moreover, Bob is a songwriter whose words and tunes have been praised by "Melody Maker" and "Pickin" Magazine, and two of his songs appear on Alison Kraus' most recent album. Bob's first album, *The Dancer Inside You*, received a 4-star rating from "Downbeat" Magazine and Bob has recently released a new CD, *Rushsylvania*. Bob's musical expertise encompasses folk, bluegrass, swing, rock, and spiritual music of many genres.

Ernest Jordan (John Henry, J.P. Morgan, other roles) returns to Mad River Theater Works after an appearance in the 1995 tour of *Freedom Bound* in the leading role of Addison White. Other past performances include the Ohio Lyric Theatre's *Some Enchanted Evening* and *Kiss Me Kate*, First Frontiers' *Blue Jacket* as Spybuck, Robin Hood Players National Touring Theatre Company's *Thomas Jefferson*, and Yellow Springs Center Stage's *Fences* as Gabriel. Ernest holds a BA in Theatre from Wright State University. In addition to Ernest's work in theater, he has served as a professional TV cameraman and as a professional tennis player.

Synopsis

The play opens in the cabin of a man named John Henry in the West Virginia mountains. After a short section of the traditional song, *John Henry*, the audience discovers that they are visiting this character who denies that he is the “real” John Henry, the famous character of folklore. He agrees, however, to tell what he knows about the story of the John Henry, the folk hero.

John Henry’s story begins before the Civil War in the 1840’s. The first scene shows John Henry’s papa taking John Henry as a baby outside right after he is born to talk to him about his hopes and dreams for his future. John Henry was born a slave and his papa hopes that someday he will be free. Papa is confronted by Master Cooper Boots, who wants to hold the baby. At first, Papa refuses, but relents when threatened. Master Boots tells Papa he is wasting his time hoping for freedom.

The second scene shows John Henry as a young man. He plays a trick on Master Boots, getting the Master to rope a horse John Henry knows is wild. After being dragged through the mud, Master says he is going to sell John Henry. John Henry is saved when the two men hear far-off church bells signaling the arrival of General Sherman’s army. John Henry is free at last.

John Henry decides to travel to New York to find work. He meets a doorman, Mr. McGregor, who offers him a job operating a steam elevator. John Henry refuses, saying that he is just a laborer. McGregor directs him to a mission where he can get a hot meal and a place to stay. Then we see McGregor meeting with J.P. Morgan, the famous banker. McGregor has invented a design for a steam drill, a mechanical device used to drill holes for blasting in the process of tunneling (see background material). J.P. Morgan agrees to support McGregor’s invention.

Meanwhile, at the mission, John Henry has been recruited to work on the Big Bend tunnel in West Virginia. John Henry travels to the mountains and learns to be a “steel driver,” a worker who hammers steel bits through rock to drill holes for blasting. This is the same process, done by hand, that the steam drill was invented to replace.

John Henry thrives in his work as a steel driver and soon earns a reputation as the best steel driver in the camp. He tells a young boy about his feelings and his love for his job.

McGregor arrives in the camp with the new mechanical steel driver and John Henry’s boss arranges for a contest between John Henry and the steam drill. McGregor recognizes John Henry and tries to dissuade him from racing the steam drill. John Henry is confident, however, and the contest goes forward. The traditional song, *John Henry*, tells the story of the contest. John Henry beats the steam drill, but dies of a broken heart because he knows that the days of men like him are numbered. The steam drill will replace them in time.

At the conclusion of the play, John Henry draws the distinction between the legend of John Henry and the reality of the life of a man who never wanted anything more than to do an honest day’s work. He admits that if you can see through the exaggeration of the folklore, he may indeed be the “real” John Henry. The most important thing to remember, he says, is that “a man ain’t nothin’ but a man.”

Background to the Story

John Henry is based on the traditional folk song, “John Henry,” historical research, and information from folklorists who have attempted to trace the origins of the John Henry stories and songs through interviews with people who might have known the “real” John Henry. There is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding John Henry. Although many people believe that he was an actual person, there is no definitive documentation of his life or the famous contest with the steam drill.

The principal research into John Henry’s life was conducted in the 1920’s by two scholars, Guy Johnson and Louis Chappell. John Henry lived from approximately 1840 to 1875, so it is possible that many people were still alive at the time of this research who could have known John Henry. Johnson and Chappell advertised in newspapers and periodicals seeking to interview people who knew John Henry, and people responded from all over the United States. There were many stories from Alabama from men who said they had worked with John Henry. Southern West Virginia was also a source of many stories. In some cases, informants said his name was really ‘John Hardy.’ After countless interviews and cross-checking with the historical records of the day, Johnson and Chappell concluded that John Henry was a real person who worked in northern West Virginia on a tunnel that was part of the construction of a rail line from Washington, D.C. to Cincinnati. Contests between steel drivers were common, but there is no record nor any first person account of the contest with the steam drill.

Only a few facts are known for sure. John Henry was a former slave who was originally from Virginia or North Carolina. He was an itinerant tunnel worker and may have worked on several tunnels during his career. The tunnel where the contest was supposed to have taken place is called “Big Bend,” probably referring to a bend in the Greenbriar River.

Much of the power of the song and legend seems to come from the mystery surrounding John Henry. We all feel the tension between man and machine and because so little is known about John Henry, the story of his struggle is open to many interpretations. Over the years, many different artists have offered their own versions of the legend. The play produced by Mad River is another of those versions. The story contained in the play is presented as “the true story,” however, we must admit that we don’t know any more than anybody else. That claim is theatrical artifice. The truth behind the story is very important to us though. We developed this play because we thought we could help to illuminate why John Henry and his song have proved so enduring. We have created a story that shows John Henry as a flesh and blood human being who became a hero because of his willingness to put his entire heart and soul into the struggle with mechanization. The song says, “A man ain’t nothin’ but a man.” *John Henry* focuses on the importance of respecting all people and recognizing the challenges we all face in our daily lives.

The Work of Steel Drivers

John Henry is referred to as a “steel-driving man.” He is commonly associated with railroads and many people assume that steel-driving is the process of driving railroad spikes while laying track. This misconception has been compounded by many children’s books and portrayals in the popular media. Most of these works choose to ignore the facts behind the John Henry story and show John Henry driving railroad spikes. Many interpretations of the legend also describe John Henry as gigantic, similar in size to Paul Bunyan. We felt there was more power in remaining true to the known facts, but it helps to know a little bit about the work of steel drivers.

John Henry lived during the time when railroads were expanding throughout the United States. It was a time when most of the work was still being done by hand. One of the most difficult tasks was tunneling through mountains. The Big Bend tunnel, where the contest with the steam drill took place, was 1 ½ miles long. It was the longest tunnel in the world at the time it was built. In order to create the tunnel, the rock had to be blasted away in a shaft through the mountain. Teams of men drilled 15-foot deep holes in the rock across the width of the shaft. Others then inserted blasting powder and the charges were set off. The rock was pulverized. Then, men with wagons and mules would haul the pieces of rock out of the shaft and the process would start all over again.

The process of drilling the holes was called “steel driving.” One man, the **shaker**, would hold onto a steel bit. A second man, the **driver**, hit the bit with a hammer. After each swing of the hammer, the shaker would turn the bit ¼ turn. Swing after swing of hammer would slowly drive the bit further and further into the rock. At first, short bits were used. As the hole got deeper, longer bits were substituted. It took a shaker and driver one working day to drill one hole.

John Henry was a steel driver. He was supposed to have used two hammers instead of one. Some claimed that John Henry could drill two holes in one day, quite an accomplishment for the time. Still, the work was very difficult. It is little wonder that the steam drill was one of the first tools developed to speed the process of building railroads.



The Ballad of John Henry

John Henry was a little baby
Sittin' on his papa's knee
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel
Said, "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord!
Hammer's gonna be the death of me."

The Captain said to John Henry
'Gonna bring that steam drill 'round
Gonna bring that steam drill out on the job
Gonna whop that steel on down, Lord, Lord!
Whop that steel on down.

John Henry told his captain
"A man ain't nothin' but a man
But before I let your steam drill beat me down
I'll die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord!
I'll die with a hammer in my hand."

Sun shine was hot an' burnin',
Wer'n't no breeze a-tall,
Sweat ran down like water down a hill,
Dat day John Henry let his hammer fall, Lord, Lord,
Dat day John Henry let his hammer fall.

John Henry started out on de right hand,
De steam drill started on de lef'—
"Cap'n, bet yo' las' red cent on me,
Fo' I'll beat it to the bottom or I'll die, Lord, Lord,
Fo' I'll beat it to the bottom or I'll die.:"

John Henry said to his shaker,
"Boy, why don't you sing,
I'm throwin' twelve poun'd from my hips on down,
Jes' listen to that cold steel ring, Lord, Lord,
Jes' listen to that cold steel ring."

Oh, de Captain said to John Henry,
"I b'leve this mountain's sinkin' in,"
John Henry said to his Captain, "Oh, my,
Ain't nothin' but my hammer suckin' wind, Lord, Lord,
Ain't nothin' but my hammer suckin' wind."

John Henry tol' his shaker,
"Shaker you better pray,
For if I miss dis six-foot steel,
Tomorrow'll be your buryin' day, Lord, Lord,
Tomorrow'll be your buryin' day."

John Henry tol' his Captain,
"Looka yonder what I see –
Yo' drill's done broke an' yo' hole's done choke,
H'it cain't drive steel like me, Lord, Lord,
H'it cain't drive steel like me."

The man that invented the steam drill
Thought he was mighty fine
But John Henry made fifteen feet
The steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord!
The steam drill only made nine.

John Henry hammered in the mountain
His hammer was strikin' fire
But he worked so hard, he broke his poor heart
He laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord!
He laid down his hammer and he died.

They took John Henry to a hillside,
He looked to the heavens above;
He said, "Take my hammer and wrap it in gold,
And give it the girl I love, Lord, Lord,
Give it to the girl I love."

Well, every Monday mornin'
When the bluebirds begin to sing
You can hear John Henry a mile or more
You can hear his hammer ring, Lord, Lord,
You can hear his hammer ring.

The lyrics to the **Ballad of John Henry** were collected from individuals in the West Virginia mountains in the 1920's. Different versions of the song were sung by different people. The above lyrics are drawn from two original sources as documented by the Library of Congress and the published text in **Rise Up Singing** published by Sing Out Magazine.

Vocabulary

The following are words that are used in the play. In context, their intent should be readily understandable to almost all children, however, it might be useful for children to be familiar with these words.

asset	compartment
balance sheet	elevated railway
filly	efficient
corral	speculation
wherewithal	patent
loitering	manufacture
pitiful	smithereens
destiny	stunt

The following are phrases and slang words that are used in the play. As above, their intent should be understandable.

<u>word or phrase</u>	<u>meaning</u>
“gussied up”	dressed up
“a mean streak a mile wide”	very mean
shenanigans	fooling around
“coppers”	antiquated term for police
doorman	person who opens doors in fancy buildings
kindly	kind
“off the hook”	get away
“a goner”	dead
water boy	carries water to workers
Captain	boss