

Freedom Sings, a play inspired by Martin Luther King, is a must see

By Kate Gilderdale
Stouffville This Month

In 1997, inspired by the story of Martin Luther King, composer and lyricist Jenny Bowen started writing *Freedom Sings*, a musical drama based on the life of the great American civil rights leader.

When the work premiered at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, England, in November, it opened to glowing reviews from both critics and audiences. Since Jenny's previous musicals, including *Starchild* and *Crucifixion*, were written specifically for church congregations, she relished the opportunity to bring a spiritual story to the secular stage.

"I knew that (the earlier works) would never be seen outside of the church environment, where of course one is preaching mainly to the converted," she explained. "At some point along the way, as I researched the material for *Freedom Sings*, I realized that my own story, and the trials and tribulations I had been through, could be interwoven into the historic events," she said.

"I felt a genuine sense of awe that God was going to bring something good out of my pain." Jenny met her first husband, Keith, a black Trinidadian, when she was 17. They moved to England and got married when she was 21. "When we started looking for rental accommodation we had great difficulty in finding a place to live. (People) would be great to me, but when Keith showed up it

was a different story."

After her husband was brutally beaten by skinheads in a racist attack which left him with a severely fractured skull and broken ribs, the couple decided to move to Canada and start a new life. One day, a number of years after the attack, Keith came home from work and collapsed in the doorway. "He never came out of the hospital."



Jenny and Kate Bowen

Tests revealed that the cause of death was a virus in the brain, which doctors believed had likely been contracted when he was attacked, and had lain dormant until his collapse. "He was 33 years old and we had two children; Joanna, aged three, and James, who was one-and-a-half. I was pregnant with Kate when he died."

Although Kate, now 23, never knew her father, she inherited her mother's passionate desire to combat racism and spread King's message of love and peace, along with her talent for music and composition. When Kate saw *Freedom Sings* in Leeds, she discovered that the

majority of the actors knew little about their American history. "In early rehearsals, a lot of them were crying when they were sold as slaves."

Most of the cast, who ranged in age from 7 to 70, were volunteers from the local black community and many had no experience of acting, but that did nothing to detract from the power of their performances, observed Nick Ahad, theatre critic of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. "Watching *Freedom Sings*, I was moved like never before," he wrote.

"The play tells the story of Martin Luther King and the emancipation of black people, interwoven with a tragic love story between a white woman and a black man. But that tells only the smallest part of the story. To say that *Freedom Sings* is powerful does not begin to describe what I saw." When a black boy and a white girl plead to be allowed to play together in *He's/She's my friend*, noted Ahad, "I cried tears of deep sorrow and pain."

"I saw the play three times, and every night people were crying," said Kate. As one female cast member told Jenny, "We were not acting, we were all crying, we were grieving over our own children." And the predominantly white, middle-class audience reacted with overwhelming enthusiasm, said Jenny.

Freedom Sings has attracted interest from the theatrical community in London, Toronto and New York. As Nick Ahad wrote in a personal note to Jenny, "I think this is a play that the world needs to see."

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