

Slave – A Question of Freedom reviewed



Joan Davies is moved and more by a remarkable story

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The Slave Trade was abolished 200 years ago. That's what we're all taught. Yet slavery still exists, outside the law and the United Nations' Convention of Human Rights, and on a scale that's hard to believe: apparently there are more enslaved people today than at the height of the transatlantic slave trade.



Feelgood Theatre Productions' *Slave – A Question Of Freedom* has premiered at The Lowry before moving to London and a national tour. The production is based on the autobiography of Mende Nazer, who was captured from her village in South Sudan and sold into slavery at the age of twelve. Mende regained her freedom years later in London and her story moved from the pages of the press to be told in her own voice in a book 'Slave', co-authored with war-reporter and successful novelist Damien Lewis and recently appeared on our television screens as the drama 'I Am Slave'.

Having read Mende's book six years ago, Caroline Clegg, founder of Manchester-based Feelgood, has collaborated with local writer Kevin Fegan to bring the story to the stage in a compelling account largely faithful to the original.

Story telling is at the heart of the oral tradition of the Nuba people whose strong culture still survives, under difficult conditions, in the mountains of southern Sudan. After a brief scene in an asylum centre we are taken back to Mende's childhood and a picture of family and community recognisable throughout the world: the bonds and occasional tensions of family, schoolgirl aspirations and occasional misdemeanours, tradition, ritual and the importance of belief. This life is dramatically disrupted by violent raids and Mende, along with other children, is captured, raped, and taken to Khartoum to be sold as a domestic slave. Her owners treat her cruelly, deprive her of her name and attempt to deprive her of her dignity. She eats leftovers from the table, sleeps in a hut, and works without any reward for years. Eventually she is sent to London, still a slave, but now working for her owner's sister whose husband is in the diplomatic service. In London she begins to learn of her rights to freedom, escapes, and eventually, though not easily, gains refugee status and is allowed to remain in the UK...

Rather than living quietly she sees that her story is told and uses the finance and publicity gained to campaign against the barbaric trade and to set up a foundation to build a school in her home village.

Young actor Lashana Lynch describes playing the role of Mende as 'an honour'. She does justice to that honour in an impressive portrayal, conveying the innocence and wonder of childhood with infectious verve and growing into a young woman who retains an inner dignity while enduring inhuman treatment. The rest of the talented cast take a variety of roles with no weak links. Joe Speare brings his impressive singing voice to the role of Kujur, a human being with a spirit of God inside him. Elena Pavil portrays Mende's 'owner' and her sister as believable successful women who deserve their place in society and rarely doubt their right to own another individual. Ensemble work is sharp and sure-footed and ensures the cast imbue the dance and song presented as part of Nuba culture with warmth and naturalism.

Drama works best when there is some uncertainty, particularly where there is moral ambiguity. In a tale of slavery there's no room for this: the audience knows the difference between right and wrong.

There's no debate at the end of the play. Dramatic impact has to come through other means, an enlightening exploration of the human condition, a window into other cultures, an uncertain outcome. All can grip an audience and repay the talent on show. The strongest part of this production is the midsection from capture to slavery in Khartoum and eventual domestic slavery in London. The calm start does, however, accentuate the contrast with Mende's life from capture onwards, and the dramatic distancing techniques used to display the experience of violent behaviour are effective without forcing you to look away. Nigel Hook's design, making great use of universal circular images, stage, a table, rugs, pots and pans, accentuates the human connection between the different societies, families and friends. Lighting design by Gareth Starkey and Sound by John Redfern complement the action. Mende herself was present at Press Night and clearly much moved by the performances, the work of Caroline Clegg, and the support of the audience. The play achieves its objective of story telling; the story itself is a spur to action. Next week the play will be move from Salford to be performed at The House of Lords. Just over two hundred year ago Manchester sent a petition to the House of Lords supporting the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill of 1806 which eventually became law. The hope is that the telling and retelling of this powerful story of modern-day slavery will encourage our present day legislators to effective action.