PO Box 156, Zanesfield, Ohio•43360•937-465-6751•www.madrivertheater.org

PRESENTS

MAD RIVER THEATER WORKS
ORIGINAL MUSIC THEATER

John Henry

Study Guide

Produced with the generous support of Honda of America Manufacturing, Inc., The Columbus Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Ohio Arts Council and PNC Arts Alive.
About the Company

For 32 years, Mad River Theater Works has been an artistic force in rural Ohio. Mad River’s primary work has been the production and touring of original plays with music, bringing the integrity of professional theater, songwriting and storytelling to young audiences throughout Ohio and the Midwest. Many of Mad River’s productions are based on rural stories themselves, collected by Mad River while working in these communities. For many years, Mad River has toured North America through a national booking agent, bringing select shows from its repertoire to over 100,000 young people annually. While at home, Mad River continues to conduct residencies and educational outreach programs as well. All told, Mad River intends to affirm the value of rural experience in a rapidly developing and changing world.

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.

About the Play

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.

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. 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
John Henry thrives in his work as a steel driver and soon earns a reputation as the best steel driver in the camp. 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. 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.
About Steel-Driving

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. Many children’s books and portrayals in the popular media have compounded this misconception. 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 1/2 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 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 1/4 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. 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 Value of a Legend

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 of 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.