



## JOHN BROWN: TRUMPET OF FREEDOM

Written by Norman Thomas Marshall and George Wolf  
Reilly

At St. Marks-in-the-Bowery  
Extended run: information at [www.wbworks.com/johnbrown](http://www.wbworks.com/johnbrown)

Review by Larry Litt

In these final days of the 2004 election campaign many people have suddenly woken up to discover they must act to prevent their issues from being defeated by others at the polls.

Not since the Vietnam War era has this country's leadership inspired activists to take to the streets and make their desires known for the country's direction. Whether liberal or conservative, these activists are willing to sacrifice their time and occasionally their freedom in defense of their principles, values ethics and morals.

John Brown, the legendary 19th century abolitionist, went a giant step further. He was determined to bring attention to, and change forever, the inhumanity of slave owners and the laws that protected their insidious property rights for legally owning human beings. He was willing to give up his own life, the lives of his sons and a small company of untrained, dedicated, volunteer, ragtag army of followers who believed in him and The Cause.

On Halloween Eve 2004 I saw Norman Thomas Marshall mesmerize an audience with his portrayal of John Brown. Despite distractions from street noise, we followed his every word, gesture and movement as if we were parishioners attend the sermon of our spiritual leader, or soldiers getting ready to make the ultimate sacrifice. A unique experience, I'd say, for most of the audience at the renowned pacifist central church, St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery.

From the first moment when we hear him singing a spiritual from behind us to the last when he is hung in Harper's Ferry, Marshall was the one and only John Brown. He wept while revealing his deep personal and God's spiritual pain at seeing slaves whipped and starved. He scared us as he transformed himself into the murderous John Brown, angry and proud that he had destroyed the lives of seven Kickapoo Raiders who wanted slave rights in Kansas.

For most of the performance Marshall was the condemned John Brown, happy to give his life for what he believed. But most important, Marshall showed us John Brown, a very complex and thoughtful man—father, husband, friend, leader, and challenger to the odious world of entrenched American slavery.

While most other abolitionists were preachers or editorialists, Brown and his cohort in crime Harriet Tubman were activists, helping runaway slaves, and recruiting an army to fight for human rights. That they succeeded is a tribute to their commitment. But is violence the only way?

Are we ready to give our lives for the rights we claim believe in and expect from our government? That's the question I walked away with. It's as important an issue now as it was then. I can't speak for anyone else in the audience, but I felt that until an individual can answer that question honestly, they probably don't believe in anything but the shallow rhetoric of a civil society with major problems that are avoided.

With George Wolf Reilly, Marshall's co-playwright, this one man bio-performance is a show every student of acting, politics, human and civil rights must see. You can't imagine the intensity Marshall creates through Brown's beliefs until you experience it.