

**TRUMPET OF FREEDOM: THE SAGA OF JOHN BROWN**

reviewed by Julie Congress

"What are we willing to give our lives to? What are we willing to give our lives for? How fiercely should we resist evil? Can we be corrupted by our own righteousness?" These ethical questions are all found in the program for *Trumpet of Freedom: The Saga of John Brown*. So what are the answers? The play makes it quite clear that nothing is clear-cut, nothing is black or white. Exactly what shade of grey it is--that you have to go home and figure out for yourself.

The play is set in John Brown's prison cell on the morning of his execution. Brown is writing a letter to fellow abolitionists and, while doing so, recounting the story of his life. We see him as a twelve-year-old boy, witnessing the indescribable brutality of a master to his dying, child slave. We observe the massacre in Kansas, where Brown and his sons murdered seven pro-slavery families in one of the pivotal events leading to the Civil War. We see important figures of the time through John Brown's disappointed eyes: Abraham Lincoln is depicted as a racist and Frederick Douglass is portrayed as someone who didn't want to take action against slavery. We watch the failed attack of the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, in which Brown and a small "army" attempted to launch a war against slavery. Lastly, we see Brown's last days and him dangling from the end of a hangman's rope. It's riveting.

Playing the infamous abolitionist, Norman Thomas Marshall brings the character completely to life. At some points you truly forget that it's Marshall and not Brown standing before you. He also brings all of the other historical figures depicted in the play to life, from Harriet Tubman to Robert E. Lee to Brown's wife, who visits him the day prior to his hanging. Marshall makes them totally discernable from one another using only accent, speech and body movement. He is a truly wonderful actor.

Writers George Wolf Reily and Norman Thomas Marshall have created an amazing one-man show, driven not only by the gripping life of John Brown but also by the age-old conundrum of knowing if you've crossed the thin line between "good" and "evil" and if the situation can ever justify it. Never do they judge John Brown's actions, they leave that up to the audience.

*Trumpet of Freedom* is an exceedingly interesting and thought-provoking play. The writing, the story, Marshall's acting and, especially, the issues the play raises all combine to make an engrossing dramatic experience.