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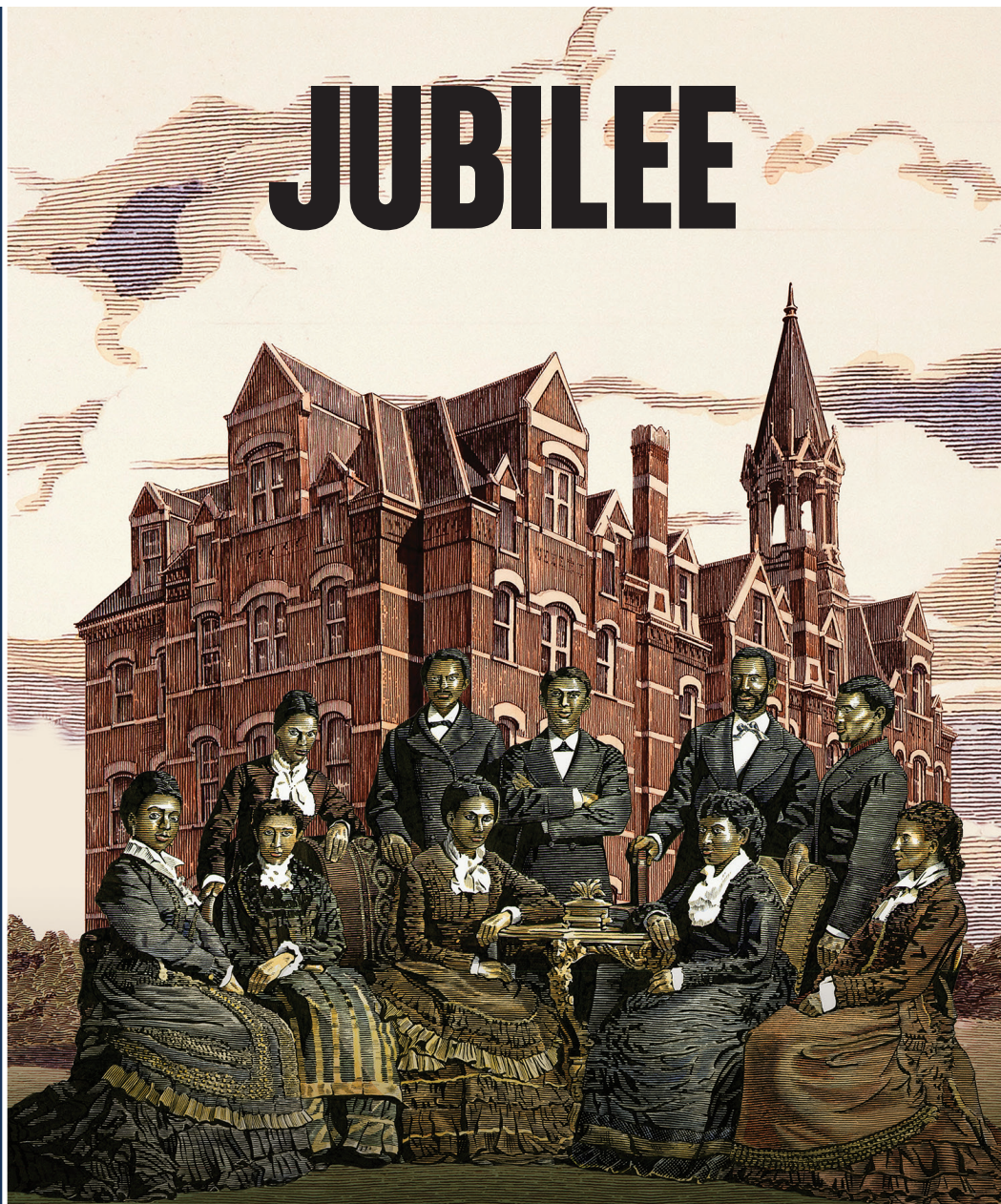
THE PLAY

In 1866, six months after the end of the Civil War and two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Fisk University was established to educate newly freed enslaved people. By 1871, however, Fisk University was severely in debt and in danger of closing.

That year **George L. White**, the school's treasurer and a music professor, and **Ella Sheppard**, an African-American, self-taught singer, pianist and composer, established a choral ensemble of students in the hopes of raising money. The nine-member group of African-American artists —**The Fisk Jubilee Singers**— embarked on a national tour to save their beloved university. Singing the songs of their ancestors, the Jubilees toured the nation, and then the world, challenging and shattering racial barriers.

In this world premiere a **cappella** musical, the characters, comradery, relationships, spirit and sorrows of the Jubilee Singers are explored through an arrangement of over 40 spirituals and the true stories of the singers themselves.

a **cappella** - singing that is not accompanied by an instrument



WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **TAZEVELL THOMPSON**

VOCAL ARRANGEMENT AND MUSIC DIRECTION BY **DIANNE ADAMS MCDOWELL**

KREEGER THEATER | APRIL 26 – JUNE 2, 2019

“There’s a meeting here tonight!”

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



TAZEWELL THOMPSON

"...I'd never heard those songs before and that's my culture! And they were beautiful ...I wanted to learn more about where they [spirituals] came from and why they were sung. I wanted to create a history for myself."

Tazewell Thompson is an international theater and opera director and an award-winning playwright. *Jubilee* is Thompson's 20th Arena Stage production. His play *Constant Star* has had 16 productions in major national theaters and his play *Mary T & Lizzy K*, commissioned by and produced at Arena Stage, was the recipient of the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award.

Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, Tazewell Thompson grew up singing Gregorian chants and Irish folk songs. His first experience hearing the spiritual songs of his ancestors was when he was in high school and his grandmother took him to her Baptist church. He was blown away by the powerful voices, melody, rhythm and spirit of the church. Eager to hear and learn more music from his culture, Thompson continued going to his grandmother's church.

He later learned about the Fisk Jubilee Singers from a PBS special and started researching the group. Over years, Thompson amassed a library of spirituals, but was unsure what shape the story should take. With the premiere of *Jubilee*, Thompson invites audiences to learn about the intimate and dynamic lives of the Fisk Jubilee singers through their music.

HISTORY OF SPIRITUALS

Spirituals are the religious folk songs created and first sung by enslaved African Americans. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot;" "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho" and "Wade in the Water" are some of the best-

known spirituals. Many Americans from all ethnic backgrounds can remember "growing up" with these songs. Spirituals are regarded as the first signature music of America. They are the roots of rock, the blues, rap and R&B.

Spirituals are bound to the ongoing struggle for freedom by women and men in the enslaved African-American community. After newly captured Africans were loaded like cattle into the holds of slave ships, enduring the Middle Passage (the voyage from the west coast of Africa to the Americas), singing was one of the few protest tools they had. During slavery, the songs may have been used as codes to help slaves escape via the Underground Railroad. They were also important during the Civil Rights Movement as many of the spirituals were sung at protests where African Americans demanded racial equality.

According to the article "African American Spirituals" from the Library of Congress, "The spiritual form has its roots in informal gatherings of slaves in 'praise houses' and outdoor meetings. At the meetings, participants would sing, chant and dance...Spirituals also come from the 'ring shout,' a shuffling circular dance to chanting and clapping that was common among enslaved people on plantations."

In terms of structure, "spirituals are traditionally sung in a call and response form, with a leader improvising a line of text and a chorus providing a refrain in unison. Many spirituals, known as 'sorrow songs,' are slow and sad. Other spirituals are more joyful; 'jubilees,' or 'camp meeting songs,' are fast and rhythmic."

According to scholar Sandra Jean Graham, when these private songs began being publicly performed in concert halls, musicians started to transcribe and formally arrange the music. Some arrangers, like George White of Fisk University, imposed standard English and precise parts. Others, like Thomas Fenner of Hampton Institute, retained the original feel of the spirituals, keeping dialect, vocal slides, space for improvisation and using up to seven vocal parts.



READ

The Souls of Black Folk Chapter XIV (14)
The Sorrow Songs
by W.E.B. DuBois
<https://bit.ly/2K5PCqE>

The term "spiritual" comes from the King James Bible translation of Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

VOCAL ARRANGEMENTS IN JUBILEE

The music in *Jubilee* is sung a cappella. This means there is no instrument accompanying the singers. Dianne Adams McDowell is the music director and vocal arranger for *Jubilee*.

She says that in an a cappella piece the voices are everything. "They are the band, the voices and the actors. When you are working with a cappella music, the voice must be the foundation for the house not only the shutters."

JUBILEE SINGERS VS MINSTRELSY

The Jubilee Singers provided a positive and empowering portrayal of African-American culture at a time when a popular form entertainment in America was minstrelsy, which mocked and demeaned African-American life.

Minstrel shows portrayed black people as dumb, lazy, buffoonish and delighted to work for white people. The iconic makeup of the minstrel clown was blackface (burnt cork or coal) with white circles around the eyes and mouth. They would perform in blackface and dance "jigs" that mocked African dance. White performers would also sing "coon songs" with lyrics about how black people missed the cotton fields and slavery. At first only white performers would participate in minstrel shows, but the form was so popular that African Americans would wear blackface and perform in minstrel shows as well. Most white audiences had never experienced an authentic portrayal of African-American life or artistry.

As the Jubilee Singers toured the U.S. they had to challenge and break the minstrel portrayals with each song and performance. White audiences were often shocked that the singers were black people. Some would even come up and touch their faces to check for blackface makeup. Although the Jubilee Singers were harassed and met with racism, they continued to tour, proudly presenting true African-American artistry.

LEADERS OF THE JUBILEE SINGERS



GEORGE L. WHITE

George Leonard White was born in New York, where his family and friends were involved with the Underground Railroad. After being wounded in the Civil War, White became a bandmaster for his regiment. After the war, White was hired at Fisk University as treasurer and he also joined the faculty as a music teacher. White's musical ability and his creative nature inspired him to form the Fisk Jubilee Singers.



ELLA SHEPPARD

Ella Sheppard was the matriarch of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. She received 12 piano lessons from a white teacher in secret and then taught herself how to compose music. Sheppard also taught herself how to read and write. After her father's death from cholera, she supported herself, her stepmother and her half-sister by teaching at a school for formerly enslaved people, before coming to Fisk University.

George White appointed her the accompanist and assistant choral director. She accompanied the choir, oversaw many of their rehearsals, conducted the Jubilees from her position among the singers on stage, and collected and transcribed spirituals until the troupe's repertoire numbered over a hundred. Because she was a black woman she could not be the official face of the Jubilee Singers. However, in *Jubilee*, the actress that plays Ella also plays George White; symbolizing how integral her contribution was to the success of the Jubilee Singers.

See page 5 for original and additional Jubilee Singer bios

FISK UNIVERSITY

Originally known as the "Fisk Free Colored School," Fisk University was established in 1865.

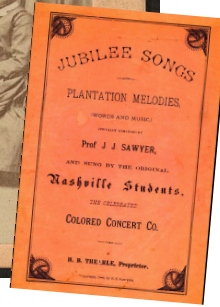
It was named in honor of General Clinton B. Fisk, who provided the site in former Union Army barracks. It was sponsored by the American Missionary Association.

Classes began January 9, 1866 and the first students ranged in age from 7 to 70. Tuition was \$12 per year. Many students there studied to be teachers or ministers. Before Emancipation, slaves could be beaten or killed for learning to read or write. Now education was available, and, in that opportunity, newly freed people saw the hope of greater freedom. After it opened, students dug up chains and shackles, discovering Fisk was also the former site of a slave auction. They sold these tools of oppression for scrap metal and bought books and other instruments of learning.

Fisk was the first of the southern **HBCUs** to gain accreditation in 1930, and has had several significant alumni, including W.E.B. Du Bois, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, poet Nikki Giovanni, U.S. Representative John Lewis and journalist Ida B. Wells.

HBCU – Historically Black Colleges and Universities





CONDITIONS ON TOUR

“The managers were working the Jubilees like horses. Touring the small towns of 19th-century Britain involved riding on rattling trains through whose windows and doors cinders blew. It meant waiting in unheated stations; walking through unpaved, muddy streets; singing without amplification in vast halls and drafty churches; sleeping on damp beds in country hotels whose fare was coarse and meager. It meant keeping up the standard of their reputation in performances that demanded such physical, intellectual and psychological exertion that they often left the stage drenched in perspiration. To prove the intelligence, dignity and educability of the American freedman, they were to behave all the while with impeccable decorum.”

— Journalist Andrew Ward from “On the Road to Freedom: The Contracts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers” by Sandra Graham.

FISK JUBILEE SINGERS

The original Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced “Negro spirituals” to the world and were instrumental in preserving this unique American musical tradition. The original Jubilee Singers were hand selected by George White and Ella Sheppard. Later, students could audition for spots.

When the Jubilee Singers started touring, they sang songs such as arias and European hymns. After a concert in Ohio, the group passed a collection plate. In the plate was a note that stated they could keep the attached \$6 if they never came back to the area “singing our songs,” meaning the European classics. While waiting for their train, White heard the choir members singing the songs of their parents and grandparents – spirituals. White noticed that not only did they sing these spirituals beautifully, but they sang them with a sacredness, with reverence and with heart. It was then that White and Sheppard decided that the Jubilee singers would tour singing Negro spirituals.

In 1873 the group grew to 11 members and toured Europe for the first time. Funds raised that year were used to construct the school’s first permanent building, Jubilee Hall. This beautiful Victorian Gothic building houses a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the original Jubilee Singers, commissioned by Queen Victoria as a gift from England to Fisk after they performed for her.

After the success of their first tours, the school’s administration arranged more rigorous fundraising tours, which left the singers sick and exhausted. In 1878 the group disbanded. A year later, however, a second group with new members was established. The Fisk Jubilee Singers resumed touring in 1879. The Fisk Jubilee Singers continue to this day, performing at venues across the U.S.



WATCH

the Jubilee Singers featured in *America’s Musical Journey*
<https://bit.ly/2FOSsLq>



LISTEN

to a recording of the Jubilee Singers from the period.
<https://bit.ly/2IarZLe>



Jubilee Hall at Fisk University was the first permanent building built in the South for the education of African Americans. The Jubilee Singers’ 1870s tour of Europe raised \$150,000 to finance the building.

THE SINGERS

Most of the Jubilee Singers were either born into slavery or the children of freed slaves. Though they gave their voices to go on grueling tours to support their school, only one of the original Jubilee singers obtained a college degree from Fisk University.

ORIGINAL JUBILEE SINGERS



MAGGIE PORTER — Soprano

With her extraordinary soprano voice, Maggie Porter became the diva of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. White once banished her from the group but found he could not manage without her voice. She performed in all three Fisk troupes between 1871 and 1878.



JENNIE JACKSON — Soprano

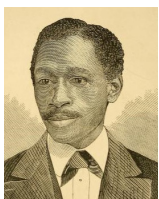
Jennie Jackson's mother was so protective of her daughter's voice, she wouldn't let her sing in choirs growing up. Jackson was among the first students admitted to Fisk. She had one of the best voices in the troupe, dazzling audiences abroad and actually having to use an umbrella to

push past them in the street. She remained with the troupe for five years.



MINNIE TATE — Contralto

Minnie Tate was first taught by her mother, who opened her home to teach other black children. She was the youngest of the singers on the tour to Great Britain. After the tour, she had to give up singing due to vocal stress and exhaustion.



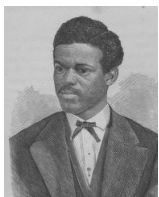
BENJAMIN HOLMES — Tenor

When Benjamin Holmes enrolled at Fisk, he had already taught himself reading and mathematics. At Fisk, he studied Latin, history and pedagogy. To cover his tuition, he taught at a rural high school for \$30/month. A news correspondent, he wrote weekly articles about the group while it toured.



THOMAS RUTLING — Tenor

Thomas Rutling came to Fisk, working and then studying as he could. He performed with the group for seven years, through all three tours. He refused to return to America and its racism after the last European tour.



ISAAC DICKERSON — Bass

Isaac Dickerson was among the first to join the Fisk Jubilee Singers. During the tour of Britain, Dickerson impressed the Dean of Westminster, who then sponsored Dickerson's education at the University of Edinburgh. Dickerson quit the troupe to pursue his studies.



GREENE EVANS — Bass

Greene Evans paid his way through Fisk working as a groundskeeper and taught at a small school during the summer. Quitting the troupe just as it was beginning its second tour, Evans left Fisk University and returned to Tennessee, where he was elected to the Tennessee General Assembly.

ADDITIONAL JUBILEE SINGERS



GEORGIA GORDON — Soprano

Georgia Gordon Taylor, a native Nashvillian, entered Fisk in 1868 and remained a student in the literary department. She trained with the original troupe and became a Jubilee Singer in 1872.



MABEL LEWIS — Contralto

Mabel Lewis was born 'Marie' Lewis and brought up by a wealthy family. At 10, she ran away from the family and drifted from place to place, changing her name to Mabel. She joined the Jubilee Singers in 1872, performing with them until 1880.



AMERICA ROBINSON — Contralto

America Robinson attended the Fisk Colored School from its opening day and was recruited to join the Jubilee Singers' third tour. She was among those who demanded better treatment for the singers, winning better pay and working conditions. She was the only group member to obtain her bachelor's degree from Fisk.



FREDERICK J. LOUDIN — Bass

At 34, Frederick J. Loudin was the troupe's oldest member and had a 2 1/2-octave range. He fearlessly spoke out against the segregation the Jubilee Singers encountered. After White disbanded his troupe, Loudin formed his own group with which he traveled the world.



EDMUND WATKINS — Bass

Edmund Watkins toured with the Jubilee Singers in 1873 until their disbandment in 1878. He replaced Greene Evans and sang bass.



Choose a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and research and present their biography.

PRESS CLIPPINGS FROM THE TOURS



A newspaper clipping from the Jubilee Singers' European Tour.

RESOURCES

“The Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory” PBS.org
<https://to.pbs.org/2WE1Msj>

“African American Spirituals” Library of Congress
<https://bit.ly/2GwruIj>

“Our History” FiskJubileeSingers.org
<https://bit.ly/2K0xMFJ>

“Fisk Jubilee Singers” www.Fisk.edu
<https://bit.ly/2VmkVP6>

“National Medal for the Arts” NEA.com
<https://bit.ly/2Uq208T>

History of Fisk University
www.Fisk.edu
<https://bit.ly/2K21n1y>

“History of Minstrelsy” University of South Florida Libraries
<https://bit.ly/2HY1OYO>

“The Spirituals Project” at The University of Denver
<https://bit.ly/2WFNRIv>

“Jubilee Singers Archives 1858-1924” at Fisk University
<https://bit.ly/2IoCz11>

“How African-American Spirituals Moved from Cotton Fields to Concert Halls” What It Means to be American
<https://bit.ly/2uUlq00>

“On the Road to Freedom: The Contracts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers” by Sandra Graham. *American Music*. Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 2006.)

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!



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Written by Morgan Charéce Hall
and Rebecca Campana

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What is the legacy of the Fisk Jubilee Singers?

2

What are the central themes of *Jubilee*?

3

What is the role of music in identity?