

Black History Month

Songs Span Generations In "Band Of Angels"

BY KARLENE HAMILTON

Making Books Sing, the New York-based company that takes books for young readers and turns them into musical stage productions, presented *A Band of Angels* at the Performing Arts Center at York College on Thursday, one of several performances scheduled for Black History Month.

A *Band of Angels* is the moving and electrifying theatre production of Deborah Hopkinson's award-winning book about the true story of the Jubilee Singers (formerly the Colored Christian Choir).

The Jubilee Singers formed the choir of the newly freed slaves at their own Fisk School in 1867. They gained international recognition soon after conception and continue to perform all over the United States these days.

The main character, Ella, is the great-granddaughter of Ella Sheppard who became the first African American teacher at the Fisk School at 17. She was born on February 4, 1851 in Tennessee, the daughter of a slave and a freed slave.

Ella's father bought her freedom for \$350 and took her to Cincinnati, Ohio where she learned to read, write and play the piano. She enrolled at the Fisk School in 1868.

A Band of Angels carries a poignant message about the importance of education in order to achieve one's goals. The child Ella was failing in school and did not care much about her bad grades because she wanted to become a popular singer.

She learns a lesson from her aunt who instructs her that her great-great grandmother, Ella who she was named after, "used her gift of singing to get an education, not as a reason she should not get one."

Ella is taken back in time to the Fisk School after her aunt proclaims, "before we lived in Queens, we were queens - and kings." The play then moves back in time through songs and acting to Africa when Africans were captured, traveled the Middle Passage, auctioned here in the West, then to Jubilee when the Emancipation Proclamation was decreed.

Next Ella is shown in Nashville, Tennessee with \$6 like her ancestor had and tuition of \$2.00 per week to pay. She is made to take on the role of her ancestor and forced to work in

order to attend school. She is offered room and board in exchange for piano lessons. The choir director soon discovers that she can sing and makes her assistant choir director.

A *Band of Angels* portrays the struggles the Jubilee Choir faced when they decided they had to follow

the underground railroad and perform in the northern States in order to raise money for the school so that it could be repaired and remain opened.

The Jubilee Choir refused to sing the songs they sang as slaves because of the pain those songs were born out of. They only sang other songs they learnt in church as they toured north of the country.

The choir members failed to raise funds and decided to return home but not before a name change to the Jubilee Singers. At this time they started singing their own songs, Negro spirituals and that was when people began opening their hearts, homes, and pocket books to them.

Ella the child returned home to New York with the knowledge of her ancestors' struggles and achievements and learns that there was a glorious history before slavery and although they became slaves they were strong to survive. "Education should not be taken for granted," she declared, "because my ancestors had to fight hard for it."

A *Band of Angels* can be seen at York College's Performing Art Center on Friday, February 11 at 10am and Saturday, February 12 at noon. Tickets range from \$10-\$18.

"Before we lived in Queens, we were queens - and kings"

-A Band of Angels



A musical adaptation of "A Band Of Angels" is now on stage at York College.