



Allen Grundy, left, and James Reed Faulkner portray a coachman and a runaway in a scene from a Talking Back Living History Theatre production.

Asking tough questions about slavery is nothing new for Naomi Carrier-Grundy and her husband, Allen.

Since 1998, the former Houston educators — under the auspices of their “edutainment” company, Talking Back Living History Theatre — have been working with Texas historical-site administrators from Washington-on-the-Brazos to the Liendo Plantation in Waller County to dramatize stories of enslaved people previously excluded from site interpretations.

It hasn't been easy. Interpretations of something as horrific as slavery never are. But Carrier-Grundy, a poet and former history teacher, sees it as a ministry for the truth.

“I think what has contributed to our

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ing a proclamation last year by then-President Bill Clinton — to document and preserve Underground Railroad sites nationwide, Naomi Carrier-Grundy believes it could become an “extension of the civil rights movement.”

The challenge is to make sure Texas is not excluded.

“It's not just conjecture anymore,” Carrier-Grundy says. “We have to document something.”

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Carrier-Grundy believes showing the interdependence of the black and white communities — during slavery and after — is the key to honest, effective interpretation.

Talking Back productions try to address not only the lives of slaves but also the lives of those who enslaved them. The approach, however, is not without controversy.

When the group performed *Cane Cutter Country: The Saga of the Lake Jackson Plantation* at the November symposium, there were audience members of both races who had problems with the interpretation.

Set at Abner Jackson's sprawling sugar-cane plantation about 50 miles south of Houston at the beginning of the Civil War, the piece chronicles the love affair between a slave named Rosa and Abner Jackson's son John; the murder of John by his brother George; and the escape of another slave named Peter to Mexico.

General criticisms ranged from “sticking too close to the facts” to the use of some offensive language from the period. Many blacks, however, felt the piece showed too much sympathy for white plantation owners.

“This is not a political agenda; it's a historical mission,” Carrier-Grundy stresses. “Our integrity compels us to be fair.”

As difficult as it is to document the stories of slaves, interpreting them is an even bigger challenge.

Through their joint partnership with the Sam Houston Memorial Museum in Huntsville, a story has emerged about a slave who was a coachman to Sam Houston — a fellow named Tom Blue.

Blue's “strange and dramatic escape” to Mexico was documented in the book *My Master: The Inside Story of Sam Houston and His Times*, written nearly a century ago by former slave Jeff Hamilton, as told to author Lenoir Hunt:

“Blue knew that Mexico, which my master called a republic in name only, did not allow slavery under its laws. He also knew that many slaves had managed to get to Mexico just like they had managed to reach Canada, over ‘underground railways’ with the help of Northern people who sympathized with us.”

Carrier-Grundy says, “We are not sure how he got there, but we do know that some 5,000-plus people escaped. They didn't get where they were going overnight. They were fed, they were guided, they were ferried across the river. You can't get from East Texas to Mexico without having some rivers to cross.”

In October, the Grundys traveled to Philadelphia to participate in the unveiling of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom project, a joint venture between the National Park Service and the National Parks Conservation Association.

And early next month, Talking Back will host its second forum as part of the Texas Underground Railroad Network for Education and Dialogue, or TURNED.

“When museums and parks exclude people, it makes them invisible,” says Bakari, telling about his role in introducing discussions of slavery at Williamsburg. “To introduce the African-American factor was to change the perception of Williamsburg.”

“It's all about cultural and heritage tourism,” Carrier-Grundy says. “Black people will come if you have something to include them.”