

Review: A Runaway Slave Rides West in ‘Cross That River’

Cross That River

By MAYA PHILLIPS

DEC. 20, 2017



Allan Harris in “Cross That River,” a musical about a runaway slave for which he also wrote the songs.

Credit Carol Rosegg

“This sure ain’t a tale you gonna read about in them dime-store Westerns,” the actor and composer [Allan Harris](#) confides in “[Cross That River](#)” — and he’s right. Look elsewhere for Roy Rogers or the Man With No Name; the hero of this show is Blue, a runaway-slave-turned-cowboy making his way during America’s westward expansion.

With five musicians onstage and four actor-singers seated at microphones in front of them, “Cross That River,” at 59E59 Theaters, is a showcase for its music above all else.

A “[protean talent](#)” best known for his takes on jazz standards, Mr. Harris flaunts his musical showmanship for the stage. “Cross That River” opens with a dissonant jazz instrumental that slowly builds to harmony and breaks open into electrifying solos. It’s a fiery introduction to a show that mixes jazz, blues and country and works best when it lives in the unpredictable spaces between genres, as in the song “Blue Was Angry,” which ends with a rousing performance by the percussionist Shirazette Tinnin.

Jeffery Lewis and Mr. Harris are young Blue and adult Blue; Mr. Lewis shows his range in “I’m Going to Soar,” while Mr. Harris comfortably embodies his raspy-voiced narrator without reaching for the

musical heights. Carolyn Leonhart (who could pass as Idina Menzel’s vocal doppelgänger) and Maya Azucena play various supporting characters.

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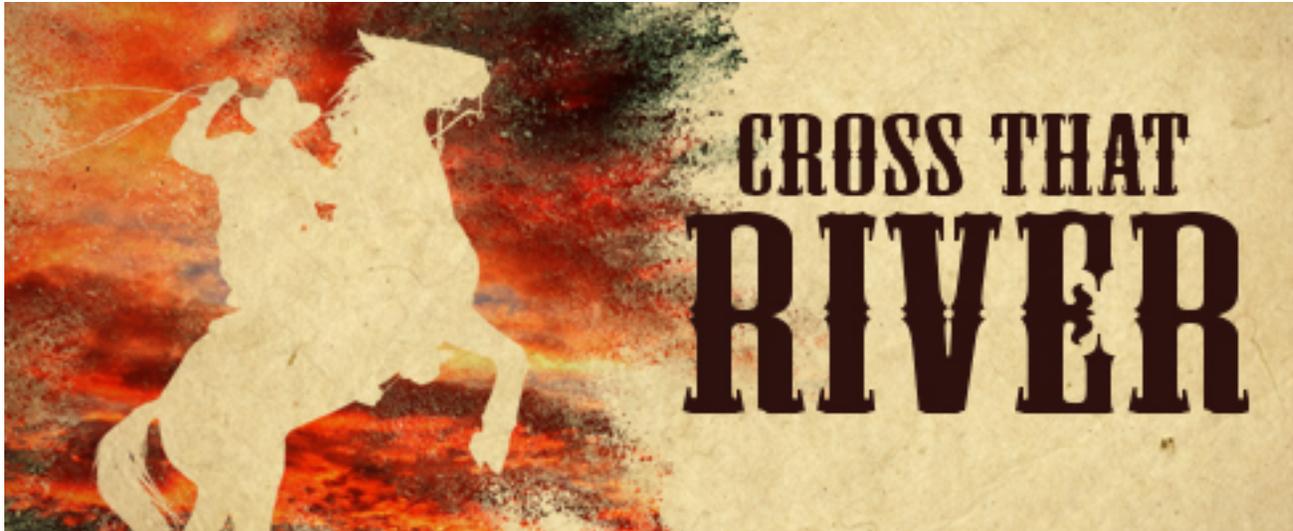


From left, Carolyn Leonhart, Jeffrey Lewis, Maya Azucena and Mr. Harris in “Cross That River.” Credit Carol Rosegg

Cross that River

Previews:

November 30, 2017



Music: Allan Harris; Book: Allan Harris, Pat Harris

Director:

Regge Life

Review:

Cross that River is a journey well worth taking for all theater lovers. It's a rare and precious experience to find a play which is both thoroughly entertaining and thoughtfully enlightening.

At the center of the show is Blue, a former slave turned cowboy, who wants nothing more than to be free to live and love as he chooses. Allan Harris is a renowned singer, musician, composer, and as evidenced here, an actor who is by turns smart, engaging, and downright sexy. The joy of *Cross that River* is that by the end, the audience feels as deeply involved as do those who are performing. This is a true ensemble piece. The performers are onstage the entire time, and completely involved in each other's work. This is also true of the five-member band. To borrow a phrase from another show, even the orchestra is beautiful.

The music is engaging, the tunes memorable, and the variety is impressive, including blues, country, and gospel. While the show has universal appeal, I shudder to think what might happen if it were to be performed by lesser lights than the brilliant performers in this setting. Maya Azucena, playing multiple parts, all but steals the show with her extraordinary voice and her total commitment to the truth of each character. She's savvy old Mama Lila to young Blue (Jeffrey Lewis) and his white girlfriend, Courtney (Carolyn Leonhart). She's spunky mail order bride turned saloon girl, Annie. She's a defeated, but not

broken, Native American woman. And at the end, she's Lila, who restores Blue's faith in the rightness of the universe.

Yes, there are flaws. The first act is too long; the "Preacher" number, while catchy, does nothing to propel the action forward. Does the Muleskinner get revenge for the atrocity he's endured? His story needs to be rounded out because we've become enmeshed in the background of who he has become and why. But these are minor faults, easily patched up by one as gifted as Allan Harris.

This insightful portrait of the U.S. is not all sunshine and lollipops. How could it be in the span of time it covers, the last half of the 19th century? Tough topics include slavery, the slaughter of Indians and their culture, and the harrowing deaths of beloved women. But Harris is at heart an optimist, with a great belief that we're all in this together. It's our duty and our privilege to make sure that we remember this country is built by people of all colors, backgrounds, and beliefs. As he so eloquently reminds us, this country is great already; it's up to all of us to see that no one's rights are stripped away because of our apathy or discouragement.

Allan Harris is a true American genius who deserves to be celebrated by all who love this noble, flawed, magnificent country. Cross that River merits a bigger venue, and a much broader audience. I can't think of anything that would make me happier than the opportunity to review it again as a Broadway production.

Cast:

Allan Harris, Maya Azucena, Alan Grubner, Miki Hayama, Seth Johnson, Carolyn Leonhart, Jeffery Lewis, Shirazette Tinnin, Jay White

Technical:

Set: Anne Patterson; Lighting: Michael Giannitti

Critic:

Michall Jeffers

Date Reviewed:

December 2017

CROSS THAT RIVER

POSTED ON DEC 6, 2017 IN THEATER REVIEWS

30
Like



(L-R)Carolyn Leonhart, Jeffrey Lewis, Maya Azucena, Allan Harris

By Sandi Durell

Resounding with spirit and vitality, *Cross That River* tells the tale of a runaway slave in the 1860s who had a dream. . . a dream of freedom. With book by Allan and Pat Harris, and music and lyrics by Allan Harris, this concert version at 59e59 Theaters is an expression of hope of a young black man called Blue, with a penchant for horses, who realizes he can buy his freedom and escapes the McLaughlin Plantation in Louisiana, heading for Texas to become one of America's first black cowboys.

Raised by a loving Mama Lila (Maya Azucena), Blue's story is told in exquisite musical detail when, as a boy (young Blue played by Jeffrey Lewis), makes his getaway – "I'm Going to Soar" – while having a secret affair with the plantation owner's daughter Courtney (Carolyn Leonhart playing additional roles) who provides him with the horse. It's risky business if he's caught but says goodbye to Mama, giving Courtney one last kiss to "Cross That River" making his way West.



Allan Harris

Each song signifies one step forward to reach his dream, winding up in “Circle T” on his way to Abilene roping Longhorns and herding cattle where he meets the grubby, cussin’ “Mule Skinner,” who taught Blue lessons of hurt and lost love.

The exceptional musicians include Alan Grubner on violin, Miki Hayama on keyboard, Seth Johnson on guitar, Jay White on bass and vocals, and an outstanding Shirazette Tinnin on drums and percussion.



Shirazette Tinnin

Maya Azucena also takes on the role of Annie, an abused mail order bride, the story told in detail in “Mail Order Woman” by the stunning voiced, emotionally charged Azucena, who also plays a Saloon Girl and Native American and a surprise role at the conclusion. The smoky, velvet voiced Allan Harris plays the role of the grown up Blue, as well as narrator (also playing guitar).



Maya Azucena

Strong, memorable “Welcome to Diamond Jims” (a saloon) opens Act II as Blue makes his way across Kansas. Mistreated Annie sings “It’s Not Easy to be Invisible” a sorrowful reveal of the abusive pain she suffers at the hand of the man who she married.

The story moves back and forth in time, more ex-slaves & soldiers making their way to freedom, and finally respite after many years when Blue has realized his hopes and dreams, the show concluding with a tearful anthem “I Do Believe” . . . America’s my home.

The tale comes to rest in a place of optimism for a better world for all.

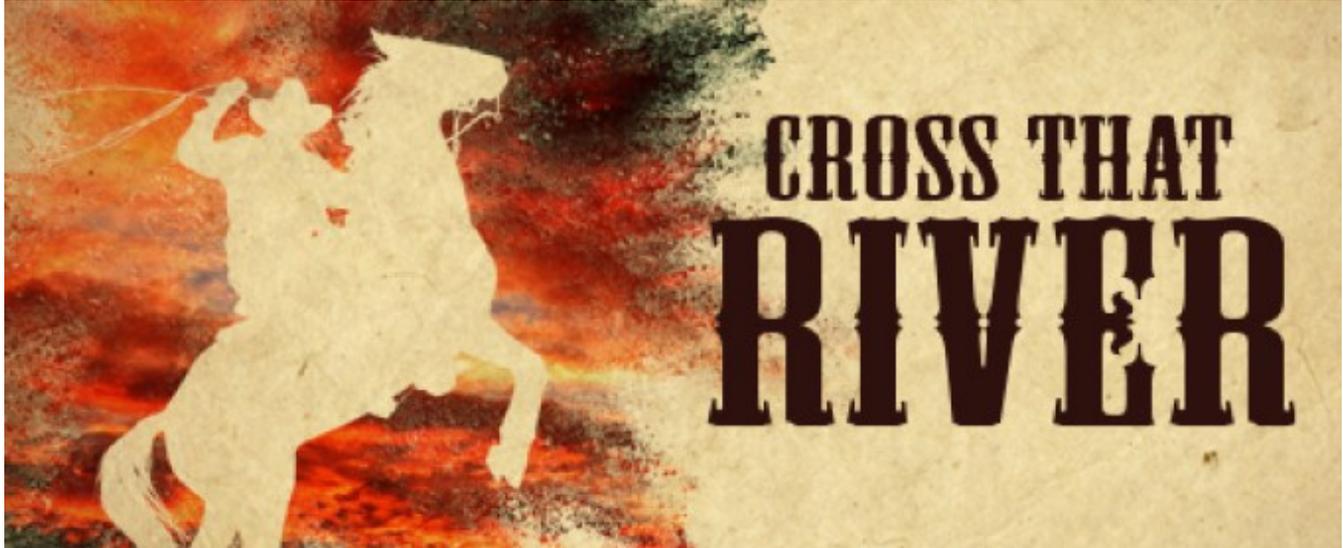
This is an extraordinary journey for Allan Harris having presented this at NYMF back in 2009 and now, after many rewrites and a new cast, brings this story of guts and blood and a Black West to new heights with a mix of jazz, blues, country and R & B tunes. It’s directed by Regge Life. From my perspective, it’s a story that needs telling and perhaps this concert will come to fruition in a fully staged production sooner than later.

Meantime, you have the entire month of December through December 31 to see Cross That River which I highly recommend.

Tickets 212 279-4200 (www.59e59.org) Run Time: 2 hours, 10 minutes

Cross That River Is More Than the Sum of Its Excellent Parts

December 9, 2017 NiteLife Exchange Ad Lib on NiteLife



By **MARILYN LESTER****** Call it a concert production, a song cycle, a jazz-rock opera, a concept piece or what you will, but one thing is for certain: *Cross That River: A Tale of the Black West*, by **Allan Harris** and **Pat Harris**, raises the bar for musical and theatrical works about the black experience in American life. It's a vibrant, energetic, music-filled piece that stands on its own as exciting theatre – with the added bonus of being historically important. *Cross That River* is the story of a black cowboy called Blue. In that tale lies a wealth of truth and implication. What *Cross That River* does is to correct history in the most entertaining way possible, and its accuracy is right on target. (Writers who bend the truth, take note: It is possible to tell a powerful story without fudging facts.) That truth is that one in four cowboys in the old West was black, yet no Hollywood or TV western played to this fact. Some even say the character of The Lone Ranger was based on Bass Reeves, the first black deputy U.S. Marshall, whose spectacular career as a law enforcement officer is the stuff of legends. The saying goes that it's the victors who write history. For the United States, its slave culture remains a haunting legacy, based on the overarching and deeply ingrained myth that America is a white nation. So much of black history and so many black contributions have been hidden from view that novelist and educator Toni Morrison refers to this as "disremembering." *Cross That River* sets the record straight. It's the work of jazz singer and sometime songwriter **Allan Harris**, who wrote the score and, in collaboration with his wife/manager **Pat Harris** also wrote the book. The catalyst of action in the story is the love affair between Blue, a slave on a plantation in Louisiana and the Massa's enlightened daughter, Courtney. To their credit, the HARRISES make that cultural anomaly plausible. That forbidden love is, of course, doomed, sealing Blue's fate. It happens he's a horse whisperer of sorts, so, with the help of Courtney and his Mama Lila, he steals his master's best horse and heads West. The journey is positively harrowing as he gallops to escape, crossing the Sabine River to freedom.



Blue's timeline is slightly ahead of the opening up of the West to men of color. A few years after his escape, at the end of the Civil War (in which blacks fought for the Union), freedmen headed West where the demand for skilled labor was high. And so, the story of Blue – as foreman of epic cattle drives, as a rancher, a lover and husband and eventually as a father, is played out in narrative and song. The strength of *Cross That River* lies in its musical thrust, with lyrics that masterfully propel the story forward. The narrative is sometimes expository, but mostly works

even with a minimum of dialog. Its cast of three, plus Harris as lead vocalist and narrator, is blessedly talented. Harris himself, not an actor by trade, reveals thespian talents, with impeccable timing, no doubt owing to his musicality



and years of expertly interpreting song lyrics. As young Blue, **Jeffrey Lewis** matches Harris in depth and charm. The pair makes a sincere duo, and the frequent shifts in dialog point of view between them is not only poetic, but harkens to the dazzling jazz technique of call-and-response playing.

The two women of the cast, who both play multiple roles, are wondrous of voice, and fully invested in character differentiation. **Carolyn Leonhart** as Courtney, a saloon hall girl and a Native American, is staunchly authentic in her dramatic process. **Maya Azucena** as Mama Lila, Annie, a saloon hall girl and a Native American, possesses one of the most expressive faces on the planet. Every emotion she feels in character appears in her countenance and in her carriage. She's a find. Direction by Reggie Life helps keep the action flowing at a well-paced clip. Although the actors hardly move around the stage, positioned behind their music stands, they're animated and energetic. Each seems to draw on an innate force of feeling to keep the story interesting and authentic.

What's also exciting about *Cross That River* is its music-making. In addition to Harris's guitar, **Alan Grubner** (violin), **Miki Hayama** (keyboard), **Seth Johnson** (guitar) and **Jay White** (bass guitar) play in the pocket of Harris' score. They're led by music director and drummer-

percussionist **Shirazette Tinnin**, a master at her craft. She not only presides over the domain of her instruments with a surety and confidence that's otherworldly, but the ease with which she does so is breathtaking. Her drumming on *Cross That River's* title song, with increasing speed, was superhuman in its emulation of desperate hoof beats. Tinnin brought Blue's harrowing flight to freedom to life and then some. Each of the numbers in *Cross That River* is distinctive and evocative of the old West, and each matches the action of the plot perfectly. It's a largely toe-tapping score, filled with influences from bluegrass, folk music, gospel and country, unified by jazz. Harris the songwriter is in the groove; his work is accessible and rhythmically engrossing.



Cross That River, toward its ending, tackles the oppression of America's native peoples, ironically at the hands, in part, of the Buffalo soldiers, regiments of blacks who served in the West, protecting settlers, capturing horse and cattle thieves and battling Indians. There's a strong message in this segment of *Cross That River*, a narrative choice that adds heft to the plot. Ultimately, *Cross That River* takes its place in over 300 years of black theatre history in this country, a history that is itself often inadequately represented or almost unknown. Who today is aware that the first black legit play was James Brown's *King Shotaway* in 1823 or that performing artists such as Bert Williams and George Walker wrote musical comedies to negate the disparaging images of blacks in minstrel shows? On the plus side, as black theater in America continued to develop throughout the years, it became increasingly integrated into the mainstream of theatrical production. It also became progressively more assertive in its messaging, especially in portraying white exploitation of blacks. Black playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Ed Bullins, Katori Hall, Suzan-Lori Parks and August Wilson, among others, are indelible members of mainstream American theatre. Yet, the hidden history of black life and culture and the vast contributions that blacks have made to the American way of life still remain largely unexplored on stage and in the history books.

Cross That River: A Tale of the Black West is a gentle but effective corrective. What's more, its end game is healing. *Cross That River* stands firmly on the platform of inclusivity. Its "we're all in this together" message acknowledges that it's the contributions of all the races that have made America what it is. "We must always remember: We built this country together" is Blue's last line, flowing into the uplifting and patriotic "I Do Believe." Amen, and hats off to Allan and Pat Harris for their forward vision and magnificent talent.

Cross That River: A Tale of the Black West is at 59E59 Theaters through December 31. For ticketing and a full schedule, go to www.59e59.org
All photos by Carol Rosegg

Review: Cross That River



Photo credit: Carol Rosegg

The incredible story of a slave turned cowboy comes to life in *Cross That River*, a musical composed by jazz artist Allan Harris, with a book by Mr. Harris and Pat Harris, and directed by Reggie Life. The show, performed concert-style at 59E59 Theaters, features a mix of jazz, blues, country and R&B, making it a true paragon of the American musical.

Cross That River is narrated by a man named Blue (Harris), born on the McLaughlin Plantation in Louisiana around 1845, close to the river that separates Louisiana from Texas. Young Blue (Jeffery Lewis) works in the stables, where he becomes close to the master's daughter, Courtney (Carolyn Leonhart), despite warnings from the overprotective Mama Lila (Maya Azucena). But his love affair with Courtney can't keep him from his true dream: to cross that river into Texas, where he could become a free man.

As he travels west, Blue's story is tied up with the various characters of the American frontier--the cowboys responsible for dozens of cattle; the saloon hall girls offering a good time and respite from hard labor; the Mexican prostitute (Leonhart), who spends a passionate night with Young Blue--all painted with a bright and cheery brushstroke so as not to suggest anything too unseemly. The only troubling stories are of Annie, the mail order bride brought to Abilene, Kansas and an abusive husband; and the Comanche natives, who Blue meets in his service with the Buffalo Soldiers, charged with returning them to the reservation where they were starving. Upon seeing their plight and hearing their sad story, Blue and his comrades leave them to return to their land.

Just as fascinating as the tale, the musicianship of *Cross That River* is rock solid. The band, consisting of Alan Grubner on violin, Miki Hayama on keyboard, Seth Johnson on guitar, Shirazette Tinnin on drums and percussion, and Jay White on bass and vocals, creates a rich tapestry onto which the impressive

vocalists weave their gorgeous story. It's nearly impossible to single out any one musician as they all stand out in their artistry.

Rivers in literature often mean an adventure; think of Huckleberry Finn and his journey on the Mississippi. The river in *Cross That River* signifies the removal of a slave's chains; to cross that river is to cross from bondage to freedom. Blue's journey is not without its trials and tribulations but his story is ultimately one of hope.

Gordin's View - Cross That River @ 59E59



Carolyn Leonhart, Jeffrey Lewis, Maya Azucena, Allan Harris

A musical musing on black cowboys of the American West by celebrated jazz artist Allan Harris.

December 6, 2017: A new musical by Allan Harris and his wife Pat Harris, *Cross That River, A Tale of the Black West*, opened at 59E59 Theaters. Mr. Harris and his wife have fashioned a poignant tale about Blue, a run-away slave who escapes to Texas where he becomes one of America's first Black Cowboys in the unsettled West circa 1860s. The absorbing story, staged as a concert by Reggie Life, weaves fact and fiction into an affecting evening with the soulful singers playing multiple roles with accomplished ease. The four marvelous vocalists are Maya Azucena, Carolyn Leonhart, Jeffrey Lewis and the silky voiced Allan Harris, who also narrates.

The terrific musicians include Alan Grubner on violin, Miki Hayama on keyboard, Seth Johnson on guitar, Jay White on bass and vocals, and Shirazette Tinnin on drums and percussion.

Cross That River ran briefly at the New York Musical Theater Festival in 2009. Now extensively rewritten and featuring a new cast, the concert is a soaring success with a surprising score that mixes jazz, blues, country, and R&B to exceptional effect.

Produced by Love Productions Records, *CROSS THAT RIVER* is now playing at 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59th Street at Park Avenue for a limited run through Sunday, December 31. The performance schedule is Tuesday – Thursday at 7:15 PM; Friday at 8:15 PM; Saturday at 2:15 PM & 8:15 PM; and Sunday at 3:15 PM. To purchase tickets, call Ticket Central at (212) 279-4200 or visit www.59e59.org.
Photography: Barry Gordin

