

# 'Unheard Voices' speaks powerfully

By LINDA ARMSTRONG  
Special to the *AmNews*

The American Slavery Project (ASP) will be presenting "Unheard Voices," which focuses on the lives of the slaves buried in the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, on Monday, Oct. 15, at CAP21 Shop Theatre at 18 W. 18th St., sixth floor; and Wednesday, Oct. 17, at the New York Historical Society at 77th Street and Central Park West.

Judy Tate, who conceived the production and is also the producing artistic director of ASP, recently spoke with *AmNews* about ASP and this very poignant production.

***AmNews*: What is the American Slavery Project?**

Judy Tate: The American Slavery Project is a theatrical response to increasing revisionism in our nation's discourse about slavery, the Civil

War and Jim Crow. ASP supports African-American playwrights who write about the era, creates conversation in the community and provides educational workshops for students and adults. "Unheard Voices" is ASP's first original piece, a collectively written monologue piece created for the 419 anonymous individuals buried in the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan who were discovered only 20 years ago and who are known only by burial number, gender, approximate age and description of their crypt contents.

**How long has ASP been around and how was it formed?**

ASP was created in 2011 in recognition of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Under the auspices of the New Black Fest and 651Arts, we created a five-play reading series of work written by African-Amer-

ican writers dealing with the era with fresh perspectives.

After each performance, we had a community conversation with scholars and artists. ASP is now an independent organization, and with the help of funds from New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs administered through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, we were able to commission writers to create work to give voice to the anonymous men, women and children, enslaved, free and indentured, who are buried in the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan.

This original work is called "Unheard Voices."

**Why is ASP something that needed to be done?**

Because as the philosopher Santayana points out, "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." ASP was

created for two primary reasons:

The revisionism in American discourse around the Civil War, slavery and Jim Crow had been increasing at an intolerable rate. During the 150th anniversary year of the Civil War, a great show was made of reading the Constitution in Congress even as they redacted any mention of slavery. Some Southerners celebrated with "Sesquicentennial Balls" and mock installations of Jefferson Davis as the president of the Confederacy. Tea parties and Southern states continued to cry "states' rights" just as was cried in the 19th century, while neglecting to mention that the main right those states wanted to preserve was the right to own human beings as chattel. The Confederate flag flies over the South Carolina Capitol building.

Secondly, in the last two

years alone, there were at least four main-stage productions in New York City dealing with slavery, the Civil War or Jim Crow, and not one of those productions was written by an African-American writer. Now, I don't believe that slavery is something that only African-Americans can write about—I think race affects all Americans—but when every high-profile production in New York about the era is by a non-Black writer, what does that say? There is such a thing as "first voice," and African-Americans are uniquely suited to tell such stories. ASP set out to showcase some of the stellar writing done by African-American writers dealing with a period in American history that most devastatingly affected us.

**What inspired you to do "Unheard Voices"?**

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Last year, while visiting the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, it struck me that all of the engravings on the slabs in the libation chamber that marked the dead only indicate the burial number, whether the dead person was a male or female and an approximate age range. Don't get me wrong—just to know that much represents an extraordinary amount of work done by archeologists. However, these engraved slabs have a familiar look, like headstones, which makes what's missing all the more conspicuous—names! Dedications! The kind of things we take for granted when we

go to any cemetery. But here, there's no way to know exactly who anyone was.

Inside the museum, there's a wall listing all the burial numbers as well, and here some of the crypts have contents listed—a bead or an object that has survived three or four hundred years. But nothing specific is known about a single one of these human beings.

As an artist, I was struck by this anomaly. So much is known and yet so little is known. They were unearthed as if in a cry to be heard. The archeologists had done so much, but I still wondered who these people were. How did they live? Who did they love? What work did they do? Who schemed, gossiped, loved, tended wounds, traded goods or held their loved ones?

Where the archeologist's

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work ends, the artist's work begins. Each one of these 419 souls had a real life, and I felt it

was my job to help give them voice. Given when they lived, they were probably very likely near voiceless, so hundreds of years later, we owe them a voice.

With the help of the two grants, I was able to commission 17 writers to research the burials and create monologues

following specific guidelines. These writers became the ASP Writers' Collective. In order to participate, each writer had to agree to attend tours and lectures arranged with the staff at the African Burial Ground as well as do independent research. Ranger Cyrus from the burial ground was a fountain

of information, and the writers loved him so much! We also used the archives at the New York Historical Society to do research. Shawn Rene Graham, our dramaturge, was wonderful at collecting and sharing research material but not overwhelming the writers.

I then asked each writer to

choose three burials that interested them with a brief outline, then we asked them to write for one of their choices, to make sure we had an even distribution of men, women, children, old, young and no duplicate burial numbers.

For more info, visit [www.americanslaveryproject.org](http://www.americanslaveryproject.org).