Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad is a play that Virginia Rep on Tour (formerly Theatre IV) has been touring since 1990. While doing the extensive research into the life of Harriet Tubman, the author included many of the scenes in the life of Harriet Tubman; in fact the whole premise of the play are the accounts as set forth in the Sara Bradford’s book, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman published by W. J. Moses in 1896, from interviews with Harriet Tubman herself.

The play focuses on the brilliantly dedicated person that Harriet Tubman was in spite of enormous odds.

There is a scene that is a direct quote from Ms. Tubman and is written in the book as follows:

“The last time Harriet was returning from the war, with her pass as hospital nurse, she bought a half-fare ticket, as she was told she must do; and missing the other train, she got into an emigrant train on the Amboy Railroad. When the conductor looked at her ticket, he said, "Come, hustle out of here! We don't carry niggers for half-fare." Harriet explained to him that she was in the employ of Government, and was entitled to transportation as the soldiers were. But the conductor took her forcibly by the arm, and said, "I'll make you tired of trying to stay here." She resisted, and being very strong, she could probably have got the better of the conductor, had he not called three men to his assistance. The car was filled with emigrants, and no one seemed to take her part. The only word, she heard, accompanied with fearful oaths, were, "Pitch the nagur out!" They nearly wrenched her arm off, and at length threw her, with all their strength, into a baggage-car. She supposed her arm was broken, and in intense suffering she came on to New York.”

The scene depicted in the play was historically accurate. That broken arm she suffered plagued her for the rest of her life and clearly the racial slur stayed with her too.

Now, more to the point about why it is in the play in the first place.

Aside from the fact that author wrote the play from which we are not allowed to delete scenes, we all know, or can at least appreciate on some level, the atrocities made against slaves before their freedom. Less is portrayed about the treatment of former slaves after the war. The playwright made a conscious decision to include this scene because it is historically exact, and it is an illustration of the degradation and humiliation African Americans endured even after emancipation. It helps bring to light the plight of patriots like Harriet Tubman even after the war. This is a disturbing scene. It depicts the racial slur against Harriet Tubman as she travels north to her home in Auburn, NY just after the Civil War. As is the case for many historically accurate depictions, it falls as a despicable act on our current sensibilities, as well it should. It is our hope it will inspire an educational and enlightening discussion between students and teachers and parents.

Offense is never an objective for any of our shows, enlightenment is. Overall, this play is one of the best examples of how to overcome adversity and to rise above it. As Harriet Tubman said, “What we are fighting now is ignorance. And that war never ends.”

Please know that we constantly look at our shows with sensitive eyes and review the content of all our shows.