

Theatre Review: King Cotton, The Lowry, Salford

[Sep 17 2007](#) By Malcolm Handley, Liverpool Daily Post

KING Cotton, Liverpool TV writer Jimmy McGovern's first stage play for 20 years, received a standing ovation at its premiere at The Lowry, Salford.

The show is due to open in Liverpool next week.

It is an epic journey, an operatic production and a tale that needed to be told.

A co-production between Liverpool Culture Company and The Lowry, it is the tale of when cotton was king and when a simple plant ruled two nations and lives of millions, of wealth and poverty, luxury and hardship and when lent dubious legitimacy to one of man's most heinous crimes; slavery.

McGovern is at his best when telling a people's tale and it is clear this is one he wanted to tell. Liverpool historian Ian Brownbill's original idea links the inextricable strands of Lancashire's cotton workers with America's cotton plantations and spotlights Liverpool's pivotal role.

With Lincoln's Union Navy blockading the southern confederate ports, Lancashire's supply of raw cotton dried up and while, in the main, the cotton workers supported the move to abolish slavery, the cotton merchants and factory owners did not.

Despite promises to keep out of America's Civil War, ships, notably the Merseyside-built and crewed Alabama, left these shores armed to break the blockade and support slavery.

King Cotton explores this complex web and McGovern's script shows it through the eyes and lives of ordinary people, cotton workers and slaves alike. – he gives the epic tale a human face.

It also has some hilarious comic scenes – top marks to John Henshaw as God.

There is more, including the starving cotton workers support for Lincoln, distrust of white union sailors for black shipmates and cotton merchants hoarding supplies as prices rose.

Liverpool-born director Jude Kelly says the play, an eight-year project, was not originally aimed at marking the abolition of slavery commemorations – some scenes, which still need much tightening, suggest otherwise. It is a great play that has the potential to be even greater and some of the acting lacks the writing's power.

Overall, the interesting notion of linking Lancashire's brass bands – in this case Ashton-under-Lyne Brass Band – with Gospel songs, fine singing by Wendy Mae Brown, Kirsty Hoiles, Cornelius McCarthy and particularly Emma Jay Thomas and the inimitable John Henshaw, make King Cotton compelling theatre.

KING Cotton is at The Lowry until September 22, and then moves to the Liverpool Empire from September 25 to 29.

* There will be a full review of the Liverpool show in the Daily Post.