

# Manchester Evening News

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## Theatre and dance reviews

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Kirsty Hoiles (Emma) and Paul Anderson (Tom) in King Cotton at the Lowry Theatre, Salford advertisement

### King Cotton @ The Lowry

15/ 9/2007

AT least seven years in the making, this ambitious co-commission between The Lowry and the Liverpool Culture Company, boasting the above-the-line talents of writer Jimmy McGovern and director Jude Kelly, finally achieved its World Premiere at The Lowry this weekend.

Has it been worth the wait? Generally speaking, yes.

It's by no means flawless and will doubtless benefit from further tinkering and streamlining but this is a production that has a big heart, a healthy conscience, plenty of wonderful music and a sense of humour to match its sense of the epic.

Essentially, it tells the story of the lives of two men, separated by an ocean but bound together by cotton.

By the mid-nineteenth century the industrial revolution had transformed Lancashire into the first industrial region in the world.

The importation of raw materials from the Americas had turned the area from one of the poorest parts of the country to one of the richest and no single commodity was more important to that than cotton.

Nonetheless, workers in the cotton mills were poor and lived in the thrall of the mill-owners.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, that cheap cotton, so essential to the British economy, was being produced using slave labour.

When the American Civil War broke out and the supply of cotton was cut off, it had devastating consequences here.

What if a far-off evil keeps you and your children fed (or the cheap clothes on your back these days), asks McGovern's script.

What is the right thing to do? Can anything be more important than liberty, equality and justice?

This dilemma is dramatically incarnated in the parallel stories of young mill-worker Tom (Paul Anderson), who's a cornet-player in the mill's brass band, and Sokoto (Israel Oyelumade), a slave in the South of America, who has been torn away from his wife Jessica (Wendy Mae Brown) and family to work the cottonfields.

While Sokoto kills his master and runs away, eventually to join the United States Navy to wage war on his enemies, Tom marries his sweetheart Emma (Kirsty Hoiles).

But, personally devastated by the tragic effects of the cotton famine, he signs up to sail aboard the USS Alabama, a ship built by the cotton bosses to fight under the Southern flag for the preservation of slavery and cheap cotton, however blood-stained.

Their stories are musically underlined by brass band music and Spirituals.

Now this might sound worryingly po-faced, something like Slavery - The Musical, and occasionally McGovern's writing feels undercut by the necessity of squeezing a lot of information and action into a relatively short space, inevitably reducing it to crude shorthand.

But there are also some wonderful flights of fancy here, most notably a show-stealing turn from John Henshaw as God!

There's also a real passion in the work, as well as bold staging, and the sheer emotional power of the music, and the story it helps to tell, shouldn't be underestimated.

If you allow for the narrative difficulties early on, the production offers real rewards.

Nothing, it concludes, is more important than liberty, equality and justice, except perhaps love. That's surely a message for all times.

**King Cotton runs until Saturday, September 22, then at the Liverpool Empire from September 25-29. Call 0870 787 5780 for Lowry ticket enquiries.**

**Are you planning on catching the show? Tell us what you thought below and/or post your own review by entering our [Reviewer of the Month](#) competition.**

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I saw King Cotton last night and thought it was fabulous. It covered everything: emotion, politics, brilliant acting and singing and some very funny bits too. I felt involved and that I cared about the characters right from the first scene. Go see it!

**Suzy123**

16/09/2007 at 10:30

Saw the show on Thurs and was entranced. The quality of the acting surpassed anything I had previously

seen. It moved me from tears to laughter and back to tears. Ashton Brass were certail as good as any of the professional musicians

**Clockwork, Greater Manchester**

15/09/2007 at 17:04

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