

NEWS SERVICES

Blackberry service

Desktop alerts

Email services

Home delivery

Mobile

Photographs

Podcasts

RSS feeds

Weekly Telegraph

FEATURE FOCUS



King Cotton: This slavery saga is another cracker from McGovern

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 20/09/2007

Jimmy McGovern has struck gold again with his slavery saga, writes Dominic Cavendish

"I know when my own work is good, and I know what we're doing here is good," Jimmy McGovern boasted a few weeks back – ahead of the opening of his first stage play for 25 years. And do you know what? He was absolutely right.

Tales of tense crew-members working themselves past exhaustion to get King Cotton up and running may abound, but now that this hugely ambitious show has got past the difficult preview stage, the rest of its run at the Lowry Centre in Salford and next week in Liverpool deserves to be packed to the rafters.

The writing is only the half of it. What gives a knockout emotional charge to McGovern's tautly woven account of the 1860s cotton trade – as experienced by the black slaves who picked it and the white workers who spun it in the Lancashire mills – is the rich fusion of music and song that floods the evening like sunlight through a stained-glass window.

In Jude Kelly's brisk, fluid production, heavily but not horribly mic'd, a 22-strong brass band mingles among the 13 actors, the entire ensemble clambering the rusted metal girders of Ti Green's monumental set as though scaling a giant loom.

When the warm, melancholic blasts of the industrial North meet the heartfelt vocal spirituals of the South, the effect is sensational.

Still, credit where it's due. McGovern, who made his name with the ITV long-runner Cracker, pulls off the trick of being at once symmetrical in his approach to structure while remaining true to the mess, pain and confusion of lives blighted by poverty and oppression.

There is, perhaps, something too neat about the way he collides the story of a lowly mill-worker called Tom with that of a plantation slave called Sokoto who flees to the North after killing his owner.

And when the Englishman, poverty- and grief-stricken following the collapse of the cotton supply during the Civil War, joins the Confederate cause in the belief that the slaves, mere "beasts of burden", cannot be allowed their freedom, the question couldn't be put more directly: which should win out, moral principles or the need to sustain a livelihood?

Yet, thanks in part to pitch-perfect performances from Paul Anderson and Israel Oyelumade as the two men, this never feels like a drama of arid intellectual debate. There are lovely flourishes of earthy-surreal humour, too, McGovern envisaging God (John Henshaw) as a grumpy white slob, lighting his fag from the flaming trapdoor that leads to hell.

Set against that, there are some truly harrowing scenes: a slave being whipped until he sinks to his knees; another shot defending the honour of his intended bride.

King Cotton manages to do justice to the terrible evils of the slave trade, without alienating its audience with finger-wagging.

The overriding message of the evening, brought out most beautifully in the choral work, and achieved with no great sentimental contrivance, is one of the possibility of solidarity and reconciliation between humans locked in a cycle of mistrust.

How timely.

- The Lowry until Sat (tickets: 0870 787 5780), then Liverpool Empire from Sept 25 to Sept 29 (tickets: 0870 606 3536).

[Print](#)[Email this story](#)

Post this story to: [del.icio.us](#) | [Digg](#) | [Newsvine](#) | [NowPublic](#) | [Reddit](#)

[telegraph box office](#)**Gone with the Wind**

Exclusive Telegraph priority booking for major new Trevor Nunn musical



Jimmy McGovern is rightly proud of his new play, King Cotton

**Fieldsales Opportunities Nationwide****JOHN ROBERTS SEARCH & SELECTION**

MOST VIEWED

Annie Lennox: Diva singing through the darkness**The KGB's long war against Nureyev Boogaloo's back****Stevie Nicks: a survivor's story****Pop eyes**



Greener Transport



BUSINESS
Light green

Lightbulbs can do more than 'green' regulations.



TRAVEL
Autumn hot spots

Discover where the sun is still shining this season.



MUSIC
Out of the dark

Seductive singer Annie Lennox on loss and longing.



TELEGRAPH TV
TV News Now

Video news as you want it, when you want it.

Telegraph Dating



alpha_charlie

Well it`s not an objective view, but I like to think that I...

[Find more dates...](#)

Ads by Google

[Black Slave Records](#)

Search 1834 Barbados Slave Registry 100K Barbados Slave Names Online
Ancestry.co.uk/Barbados

[Britain's Slave Trade](#)

Slavery banned in the UK since 1807 Hidden Slave Trade Exists Today!
www.realtruth.org/ModernSlaveTrade

[Free Cloth Nappy Advice](#)

Want to use cloth but don't know where to start? We can help
www.thenappylady.co.uk



You are here: [Telegraph](#) > [Arts](#) > [Stage](#) > [Theatre reviews](#)

[About us](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Forgotten your password?](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Press office](#) | [Promotions](#) | [Archive](#) | [Today's news](#)

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2007. | [Terms & Conditions of reading.](#) | [Commercial information.](#) | [Privacy and Cookie Policy.](#)