

MUSICAL THEATRE

'Love Songs from the Liberation Wars'

ON JUNE 17, 1943, ten thousand workers, mostly African-American women, went on strike at the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It was a dramatic story of courage. Poor workers, who were fed up with the brutal conditions in the largest factory in the South, went up against the power of R.J. Reynolds, the newspaper his family owned, and the unholy alliance – including the FBI – that propped up the Jim Crow segregation laws through this time. The musical “Love Songs from the Liberation Wars: The 1940’s Tobacco Workers Struggle” details how these women won their union.

The show opens up on the R.J. Reynolds cigarette assembly line. Conditions are hot, tobacco dust is flying through the air. The foreman is abusive; the company nurse orders workers back on the line even when they are sick, and pervading it all are the Jim Crow laws, dividing workers white and black, so that they never unite to fight the boss.

The character Theodosia Simpson (based on the real-life worker of the same name), a 23-year old African-American woman, emerges as a leader. She’s willing to confront the foreman. Another character is a husband fighting hatred overseas. He calls for the “Double V” victory – against Hitler and against Jim Crow. Another is a union leader, a white organizer from the North. He is committed to building the union, but is a little naive about how entrenched Jim Crow attitudes are.

As the show progresses, love songs help to tell the story of how the union organized across the color line. It also unfolds that the song “We Shall Overcome” as we know it today came from this tobacco workers’ struggle.

“Love songs” is a somewhat ambiguous term in this show. It includes romantic plot lines but also love for humanity, which involves stopping hatred and stopping segregation. There are whimsical notes: an actual “Jim Crow”

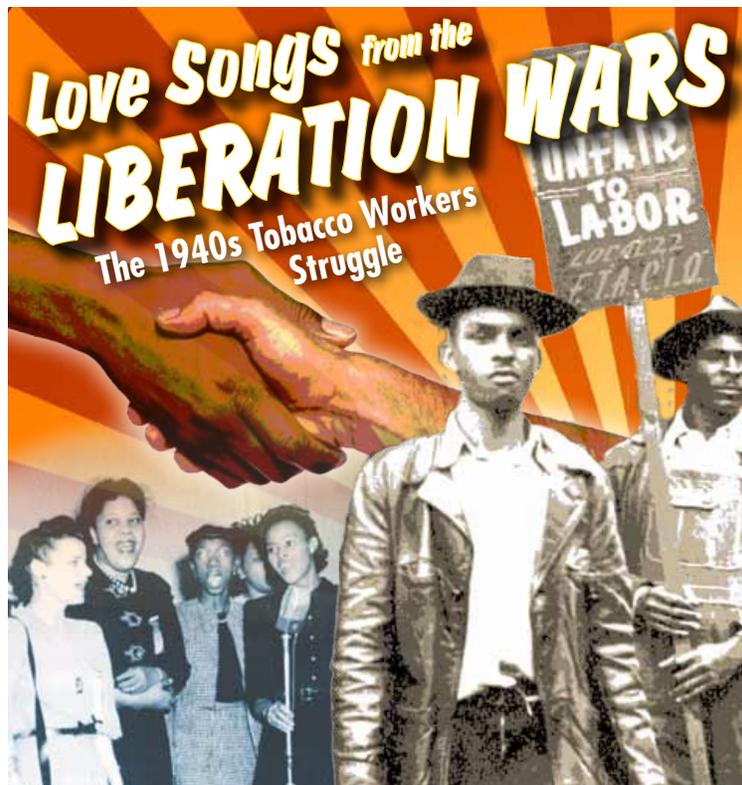
character emerges, and sings about the “separate vs. equal” doctrine, among other things. Emma Goldman comes out onstage, falls in love with a worker, and they dance together. Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Paul Robeson – all of whom came to the Local 22 picket lines in the 1940s – sing as a trio.

It could be said there are two major themes – one is the story of the union, and one is the personal and family lives of the characters. Each theme has its own climax. The union plotline culminates in the courageous strike of the tobacco workers. Then, on a more personal level, a black character and a white character fall in love and get married, a radical and defiant act against the hatred of society at the time.

IN REAL LIFE, just as in the play, the strike ended in victory. The workers – with the help of the seasoned organizers – got a contract signed. Over the next few years – the tobacco workers of Local 22 – built a strong membership that became known nationally. A woman named Moranda Smith was appointed to the national executive board of the union – the first African American to win such a position. Many of the segregated aspects of the factory were eliminated and even the Jim Crow anti-voting restrictions in the town of Winston Salem were fought against and brought down as a result of this union campaign.

Paul Robeson, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger all came down to sing and support Local 22. It was clear at that time what a pivotal moment this was in the battle against Jim Crow, and the central role labor could play.

However, over the next few years, Local 22 lost its battle to keep R.J. Reynolds organized. Claims that the union was “Communist-led” and engaged in “mixing races” conspired to end Local 22’s representation of workers R.J. Reynolds. Also contributing to the union’s demise was a drumbeat of unfavorable articles by the Winston Salem



“Love Songs from the Liberation Wars” tells the story of the 1940’s tobacco workers’ struggle. It was from this strike and successful organizing effort that the labor anthem “We Shall Overcome” was born.

Journal and the unfair jailing of union leaders on trumped up charges.

The story of Local 22 could have been lost to history. Luckily, Bob Korstad, a historian in North Carolina, wrote “Civil Rights Unionism,” which describes the victory of Local 22 and the courage of the strikers. Many others carry on the memory. A historic plaque was recently installed in Winston-Salem which commemorates Local 22 and this early victory against Jim Crow. And of course the song “We Shall Overcome” become known throughout the world in part due to the struggle of these tobacco workers. It has become an anthem for social justice

movements around the world. So we can truly say that Local 22 is gone but not forgotten, and “Love Songs from the Liberation Wars” keeps the memory alive.

The words and music of “Love Songs from the Liberation Wars” were written by Steve Jones, a member of AFM Local 161-710 (Washington, D.C.). The show was co-created by Elise Bryant, the executive director of the Labor Heritage Foundation. The musical has previewed in Washington, D.C. For more information, e-mail Steve at steve@jones88.net. The show will utilize an AFM contract when performed.