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— PLAYWRIGHT KYLE BASS

The Onondaga Historical Association has commissioned Kyle Bass to write a play about Harriet Powell, a young female slave who visits Syracuse with her Mississippi slave owners in the late 1880s. Bass is shown in the Underground Railroad exhibit at the Onondaga Historical Association. The figure in the background is Chloe Merrick, a citizen of Syracuse in the 1850s. (Michelle Gabel | mgabel@syracuse.com)

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To Gregg Tripoli, the Onondaga Historical Association is a repository of human stories that could come to life at any moment. As executive director of the OHA, Tripoli longed to turn one of Central New York’s historical events into a play. “For me, history is all about a great story,” he says. “Everybody loves a good story.”

He found his great story when he learned about Harriet Powell, a house slave often mistaken for white because of her light skin and fine clothes and jewelry. She traveled to Syracuse in September 1839 from Mississippi with her owners for a family visit in Syracuse. They stayed at Syracuse House, a hotel near Clinton Square. Encouraged by a free black man and local abolitionists, the young woman escaped to Canada.

Powell, for a time, was hidden in the attic of abolitionist Gerrit Smith’s home in Madison County. Smith introduced his young cousin Elizabeth Cady, who would later become well known as the abolitionist and suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to Powell. For two hours, the two women were left alone to share their stories in the attic while there was a \$200 reward for the capture of Powell.

STORIFIED

HOW CNY HISTORY BECOMES A PLAY THAT PRACTICALLY WRITES ITSELF



Enter Kyle Bass, playwright and Syracuse Stage dramaturg. Tripoli laid out the story for Bass. “I wanted him to fall in love with the subject,” says Tripoli.

As he listened, Bass recalls, “It really began to move on the stage of my mind, immediately. The details in the story are so dramatic. In some ways the play is writing itself. It’s home writing itself while I’m talking to you,” he says while sitting in the lobby of Stage’s theater complex on East Genesee Street.

Bass may not be finished writing or have a title for the play, but the date is set for

a staged reading. The play will be presented at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 2 at the Red House Arts Center, 201 S. West St., Syracuse. Robert Moss, former artistic director at Syracuse Stage, will direct. The staged reading will be a benefit for the OHA. October also coincides with the 175th anniversary of the discussion between the two women.

The playwright has researched the lives and circumstances of Powell, Cady, Smith and Tom Leonard. It was Leonard, a free black man working as a waiter at the Syracuse House, who convinced Powell she could

escape servitude. As much information that has been unearthed about these four figures, little is known about the conversation between Powell and Cady, who were both in their early 20s. Bass and Tripoli wondered what might have passed between Cady, an educated, free woman and Powell, an illiterate woman who, although she was treated well by her owners, was still a slave.

“The beauty of that is I get to invent because there’s no record of the conversation,” says Bass. “I can begin to invent a bit. I have to, otherwise she doesn’t speak.”

Bass feels the women’s meeting had a profound effect on both of their lives. He believes Cady’s involvement in the women’s rights movement was influenced by her brief time with Powell and will convey that in the play.

Based on historical accounts of others, but not Powell, the playwright knows the young woman was torn between the chance for freedom and the likelihood she would never see her mother again. Bass must balance remaining as true to the events as possible and drawing from them dramatic moments. Once more, he understands he must give Powell words “to articulate, not only these fears, but also her hopes and dreams.”

The writer is interested in learning more about Gerrit Smith to create a realistic portrait of the abolitionist who lived in Peterboro. Bass expects to find some imperfections. He welcomes such a discovery “because you simply can’t have a play about good people doing good things,” he says. “That’s not interesting.”

Tickets for the OHA event are \$40 for the staged reading of Bass’ play and a gala party or \$30 for the party only. Tickets are available by calling the Red House Arts Center at 362-2785 or going online, therehouse.org.