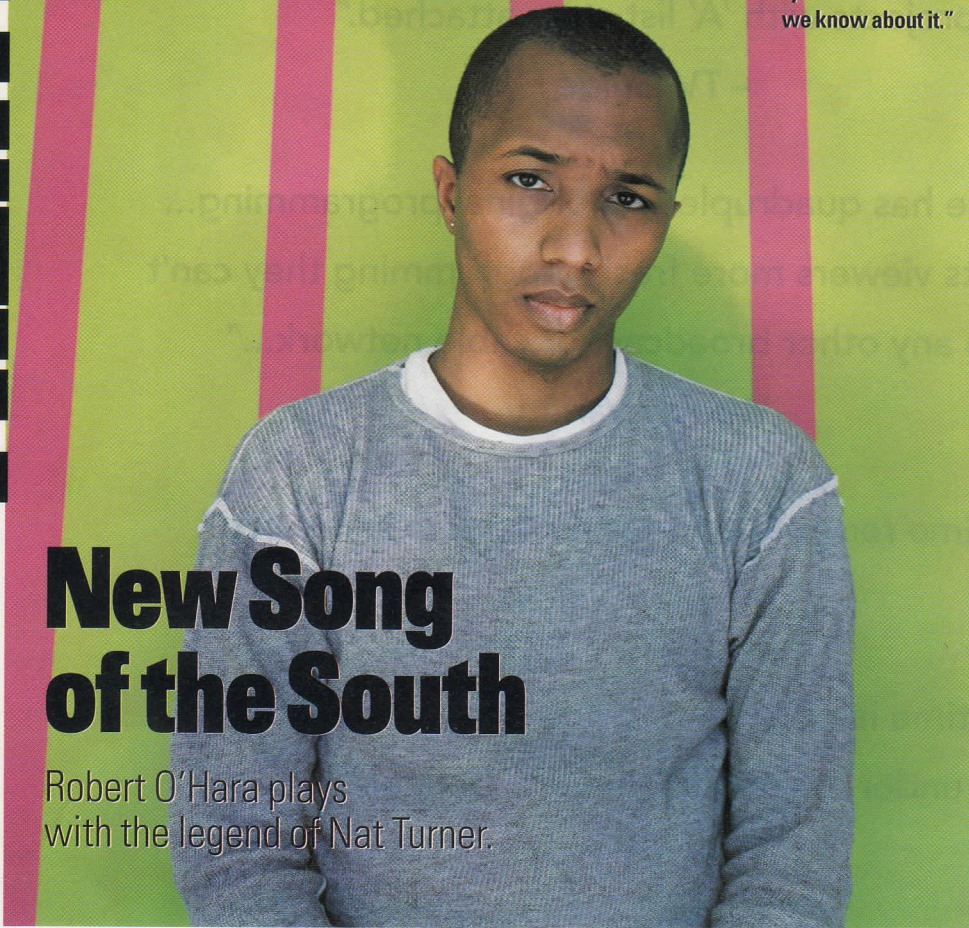


"Nothing is funny about slavery. What is funny is what we think we know about it."



New Song of the South

Robert O'Hara plays with the legend of Nat Turner.

SO WHAT'S A BLACK GAY Columbia grad student doing on a 19th-century plantation in the Deep South? "History has to accommodate me," says playwright-director Robert O'Hara. "I had to have been back *there*, or I would not be *here*." In O'Hara's play, *Insurrection: Holding History*, which he also directs at New York's Public Theater in November, his alter ego travels back to 1831 Virginia to join the insurrection of black slaves led by Nat Turner.

To locate his own place in history, O'Hara has created "a Technicolor dream fantasy" that draws inspiration as much from *The Wizard of Oz* as it does from *Roots*. Don't be surprised when a chorus line of chained slaves breaks into a Broadway production number. "Nothing is funny about slavery," says the 26-year-old Cincinnati-born writer. "What is funny is what we think we know about it, and what we take from it." Notions of oppressed people have become stereotypical, he says, while the slaves in *Insurrection* can read and write and only pretend to be dumb. "You wonder how we survived if there was no singing or telling jokes."

O'Hara is only too aware that his take on this painful period of American history is going to outrage some people. Public Theater producer George C. Wolfe, who is also O'Hara's mentor, "thinks that they are going to burn the building down," O'Hara says somewhat gleefully. "Why be timid in a play?" he continues, answering his critics-to-come. "You can do anything in the theater—you can change time periods, people can change races."

Poised to make his New York debut as a playwright, O'Hara is also ready to launch a movie career. He has just completed the first draft of a screenplay for Martin Scorsese based on Richard Pryor's autobiography. Not surprisingly, the young incendiary is in high spirits. "There is no trauma in my life," he quips, "except I don't have a boyfriend!" —GERARD RAYMOND

Fruit of the Crabtree

Composer Dick Gallagher carries on the costumer's crazy legacy.

"WHEN I FIRST MET Howard Crabtree about 10 or 11 years ago, at [New York cabaret] Don't Tell Mama, where I was piano-bar playing, he'd run through the place with costumes for his first show, *The Invisible Man*," recalls Dick Gallagher. Considering Crabtree's elaborately demented creations, he was no doubt anything but invisible, and Gallagher—a composer—was soon hooked. Along with writer-director Mark Waldrop, "we three became a little unit," collaborating on wild and witty revues of music and humor.

The most acclaimed result was the 1994 hit *Whoop-De-Doo!*, but with the threesome's latest off-Broadway show, *When Pigs Fly*—for which Crabtree completed his work only days before his death from AIDS—he hit his fabulous peak. "For having such a high drag take," says Gallagher, "Howard was totally devoid of that bitchy quality. He was a normal-guy schlump during the day, and yet he had this incredible visual talent."

Gallagher is seated in the spiffy Chelsea railroad flat he shares with actor-designer-painter Myles Fifick, his mate for nine years. "Mark and Howard and I have always been sort of from the 'be who you are' head," says Gallagher, who's matter-of-fact about his own HIV-positive status. Winning over an audience, he says, means "taking what you're given and doing something special with it." He

adds delightedly, "I worked with my mother, who's an inveterate Bible-beater. She came up after seeing it and said, 'Honey, am I getting liberal? I didn't think it was offensive at all.'"

—ANDREW VELEZ



BARRON CLAIBORNE (O'HARA), GERRY GOODSTEIN (WHEN PIGS FLY)