

they look forward to sharing the results of the expanded experiment soon.

"I find two things about this work to be particularly exciting," says Dean Ullrich. "First, these professors are involved in managing the educational process. We teach management, and I am delighted that we practice it in our own shop. Second, they are practicing action research, which blends action with assessment. It is at the heart of continuous quality improvement."

COMMUNICATIONS

Gordon Webb's *Steal Away*

"Drapetomania, or the disease causing negroes to run away, is well known to our planters and overseers . . . [but] with the advantages of proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice . . . can be almost entirely prevented."

These shocking words echoed off the walls on the night of November 9. Not November 9, 1851, but 150 years later, in Park Hall Auditorium on our campus. The bizarre notion quoted was one of many spoken by the voices in *Steal Away*, an audio docudrama created by assistant professor of television-radio Gordon Webb. Using Dolby 5.1 audio technology to create a "surround-sound" experience, Webb's work brought history to life.

Steal Away is a fictional account of Jacob, a slave whose journey to freedom is narrated throughout the 20-minute presentation. Jacob's story is told and Jacob portrayed by actor V. Damien Carter. The narrative is interwoven with the rhythm and melodies of African drumming and gospel choirs, as well as the frightening sounds of shouting slave owners and cracking whips. The character and the experience of Jacob emerged from real letters documented by William Still in his 1871 book, *The Underground Railroad*. The author collected and compiled letters, diaries, and other documents of slaves who had escaped to freedom. The book was one of many resources Webb used in his research on the Underground Railroad.



Tamika Means '02 played the mother of a runaway slave in *Steal Away*.

Driven by the desire to create a surround-sound experience with audio alone (surround-sound audio is traditionally reserved for movie sound tracks), Webb wanted a topic with emotional impact. He conceived the idea for *Steal Away* after being inspired by a *Newsweek* article about the Underground Railroad. What he didn't realize was that the research would bring out emotions within himself as well as in his audience.

If we are ever to get beyond racism, as Webb points out, we must face it in its historical context. "Slavery," he says, "is a part of our history we should be ashamed of. One way to heal the wounds is to talk about it and make people aware of it." Webb also saw, however, that the Underground Railroad was a positive example of how some people tried to help the oppressed.

Creating the drama also led Webb to meet and work with people he hadn't come across before. The title song, "Steal Away," was uncovered in Webb's collaboration with Stephanie McClain, the Calvary Baptist Church choir director. Webb had spent countless fruitless hours seeking just the right song, but when he asked McClain about appropriate music, she immediately began to

sing, "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus. . . . Steal away, steal away home; I ain't got long to stay here." Webb knew right away this was the music he had been hoping and searching for. The lyrics, sung by slaves in the field to let each other know about their impending escape, fooled slave owners and overseers into believing the slaves were singing of heaven.

It took Webb six months to research, write, cast, record, and do postproduction on the work, which involved dozens of people. Much of the talent came from the campus community as well as the Ithaca community at large. Three members of the cast are professional actors, including Carter and one of the narrators, assistant professor of theater arts Cynthia Baldessare. Ithaca students, including Tamika Means '02, who portrayed Jacob's mother, and Kelley Davie '02, who is a master on African drums, played key roles.

Steal Away premiered to a full house. Many audience members were children, attending with their families. It seemed that everyone, however, learned some new things about slavery and the ordeal of the people who suffered through it. The fiction of drapetomania was just one of them.