

## Unchained Memories

Cable TV's Home Box Office, known for its tough, edgy dramatic fare ("The Sopranos," "Oz," "Six Feet Under") and its cheesy movies and sex shows, can, occasionally, touch a profounder chord. Such is the case with its compelling new documentary "Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives" (which premiered February 10 and is repeated periodically during the month). Based on the collected reminiscences of 2,000 ex-slaves, the film gives voice to slavery's legacy through moving readings by a stellar ensemble of many of our best African-American actors.

The HBO program was done in collaboration with the Library of Congress, which collected the slave narratives between 1936 and 1938 as one of the writers' projects of the Depression-era's Works Progress Administration. Each narrative, as written, may be a rather humble recollection of one limited slave experience (we even glimpse the bare, typed pages of the manuscripts), but, once culled for drama and effect, the collective narrative--a monumental job of selection and compression done by writer Mark Jonathan Harris--forms an emotional macrocosm of their historic bondage.

The record of that bondage is understandably complex as seen in these extracts. We hear of grim work conditions and families smashed, we hear of the auction block and "jumping the broom." We hear from "house slaves" who definitely had easier lives and who clearly looked down on the field hands. In fact, the hierarchy of slavery life is discussed plainly, adding to the complexity of what came to be called "the special institution." We hear the gripping story, told by Courtney B. Vance, of how one escapee, living near a river dividing North and South, helped others escape by boat. "I never saw my passengers," he said. "It would have to be the the 'black nights' of the moon when I would carry them..."

Whoopi Goldberg is the narrator for "Unchained Memories" but we see a parade of high-profile black actors personifying the ex-slaves: Angela Bassett, Samuel L. Jackson, Alfre Woodard, Roscoe Lee Browne, Vanessa Williams, Roger Guenveur Smith, CCH Pounder, Jasmine Guy, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, *inter alia*, each one taking on the role of a different ex-slave. And take on the role they do, for these actors, thoroughgoing professionals that they are, adapt their polished voices and delivery to the originally transcribed dialogue, dialogue which, when seen on the page, can seem tinged with naive and dated Uncle-Tomisms, but, when spoken by these gifted performers, comes alive as the sound of real people. Mr. Smith, for example, a very smooth operator, is able to conjure up a vivid picture of a old man by adopting a startling but effective growl. One of the most moving sequences is the recollection by a young woman (read by Jasmine Guy) of the field rape of her mother--which resulted in herself.

"Unchained Memories" clocks in at only 74 minutes, and to keep it moving, director Ed Bell tends to switch often between narrators, with some delivering only a few lines in their turn. The narratives trace all stages of slave life; Oprah Winfrey's evocation of a young girl learning to read is one such priceless vignette. They also proceed in roughly chronological order, but the narratives cannot deal with plantation life in the first half of the 19th century because few of the ex-slaves were alive at the time. The necessary focus is right before and after the Civil War, including some touching, even amusing, episodes about the ex-slaves' world after 1865.

Significant period photos and film clips round out this document of the slavery era, and the sound track, peppered with vigorous “shout songs” by the McIntosh County Shouters, enlivens it further. Still, to my taste, “Unchained Memories” fundamentally depends on the actors, each dressed in black against a black backdrop and in close-up, spinning out what seems to be their own remembrances. To lighten the heavy-going material somewhat, director Bell periodically shows the very documentary nature of the enterprise, with cutaways in the studio, actors stepping out of character, a crew doing set-up. These are pros, recounting not just a saga for Black History Month, but giving trenchant testimony to an important piece of our collective history.

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