

**video reviews:****Howard Zinn, Anthony Arnove*****Readings from Voices of A People's History of the United States***

(AK Press Video)

Howard Zinn has made a career out of trying to erase the notion that history is solely written by the winners. With a sizable circle of readers, he has succeeded, as *A People's History of the United States* has become enshrined as a true classic, an articulately waged war against the misinformation of the American classroom: the trampled-upon minorities, the smeared resisters and the false idols.

The book has also evolved as something of a living document, with Zinn adding a book focusing on the 20th century and then compiling, with editor Anthony Arnove, a volume of *Voices of A People's History of the United States*. As Zinn explains in his introduction on this DVD—filmed on October 22, 2004 at the New York Society for Ethical Culture—readers responded so enthusiastically to the inclusion of so many neglected, powerful voices in the original volume that it warranted a text that let them take center stage. (This is typical of Zinn's self-deprecating manner, of course; the truth is that the work can't help but feel a bit scattershot without Zinn's incisive commentary and sense of narrative).

The next natural extension was to bring the work to life on stage, which Zinn & Co. have done on a number of occasions (and the events are continuing), assembling a collection of progressive creative celebrants. For this performance, Zinn and Arnove—who handle the introductions for each piece—are joined on stage by Brian Jones, Paul Robeson Jr., John Sayles, Lili Taylor, Sarah Jones, Leslie Silva, and Wallace Shawn.

Democracy Now's Amy Goodman kicks off the event by giving a warmly personal introduction for "Howard." The basic biography will already be common knowledge for even casual admirers of Zinn's—charting his transformation from young bombardier to academic hellraiser—and stretches on just a little too long before turning the stage over to the man of the hour. Zinn wryly rattles off some thank-yous and goes into the reasons behind bringing the book to life, first as a text and then as a performance.

The performance gets out to a somewhat shaky start, with the readers seeming to be a little unsure of how much of themselves to inject into the orations. John Sayles especially seems a little "miscalc" and, early on, some of the readings—while compelling as stand-alone texts—have the respectful feel of church readings or educational film strips. This isn't helped by Arnove's personality-free cold-reads between segments.

But then Brian Jones steps up to the podium to read a blistering speech given by Frederick Douglass to commemorate Independence Day in 1852. Douglass, of course, hasn't exactly fallen by history's wayside—nor have Susan B. Anthony, Emma Goldman or Mark Twain, who are among the illustrious figures covered here. But, though "famous," they still represent the alternative voices, speaking outside of power and against power.

Jones has starred in Zinn's play *Marx in Soho*, and his dramatic command raises the emotional bar for the other readers. Even if no one quite matches his connection, the evening is much enhanced by their efforts. The Douglass speech is a performance piece and Jones treats it as such, his voice rising, his eyes blazing. In it, Douglass confronted his audience about the hypocrisy of a slave-holding nation celebrating freedom and independence.

"Do you mean, citizens, to mock me by asking me to speak today?" It is a blowtorch of a speech, sparing neither the sacred cows of church or state, and yet is rational and controlled. If a civil rights leader spoke this powerfully against white America *today*, the right-wing pundits would hammer him without pause, brand him an anti-American and attempt to reassure the public with platitudes. That Douglass delivered *this* speech *then* is staggering, especially in light of the current imbroglio over a senator's simple suggestion that the president be told "Shame on you" for flagrantly breaking the law.

It's a recurring theme throughout the night (a later highlight is the Eugene Debs cry against self-serving warmongering), and it's a testament to why Zinn's work as writer/editor/curator is so vital: not only does it wrestle history away from the "winners" and again provide a forum for some of the most fearless and stubborn voices of progression and opposition, but it makes you look around and wonder "Who among us will stand so tall?"

— Adam McKibbin

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