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Sacred Spaces?

A collaboration between the Clue Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, and PHX recalls the 2015 Opelousas church arsonis

LAURIE LEVY-TUCKER | CONTRIBUTOR | AUGUST 20, 2018

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Front page, St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church. Port Barre, Louisiana, March 2015.

"Pastor, the church is gone," were the words coming through Kyle Sylvester's phone at 2:30 am on March 27, 2015.

"What did you say?"

"It's gone," the deacon, who was also a firefighter, repeated. "The church. It's burned to the ground."

Later, Sylvester's children would tell him about how they had heard the front door slam, and set up in their beds, wondering what was wrong.

When he arrived at the Port Barre site where his St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church had stood just the day before, he did not find the church. He found practically nothing. "It was extra," he told me. "It's like something that was once standing, a place you had been to, was burned flat. There was no evidence of any firemen, no evidence of any equipment. No anything. It was almost like it was incinerated. It was like a dream." He stayed there from 3 am until 5 pm the following day, as law enforcement tried to figure out what had happened. When his young son came to the scene of his father's church, tears rolled down his face. "There's nothing," he told his mother, Chantrelle. She would later describe the scene: "No one was saying anything. No one was talking. All they were doing was digging and digging."

Almost a week later, on Tuesday, April 2, another historically Black church, the Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas—just seven miles away—was razed to the ground. The final blaze came only three days later, on April 6, when Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church met the same fate. "That's when the fear set in," Chantrelle said, offering a personal testimony to members of the St. Landry community in June, 2022. "There were many nights where we just wouldn't sleep."

Mass prayer, after "Mount Pleasant Baptist Church Opelousas, Louisiana, April, 2015."

Almost a century before, in 1925, over one thousand miles away, another fire burned to the Five Points neighborhood of Detroit. The second-oldest African American Church in Colorado, reduced to ashes by an act of arson believed today to have been the work of the Ku Klux Klan.

It is in the building that the Shrine African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregation rebuilt, over the course of only a year and a half, that the Clair Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble now holds court.

When Clair Parker Robinson was born in 1948, her Black father and white mother brought her home to an apartment in the Recreation District because they could not find another place to house them in then-segregated Detroit. The church was only four blocks away, the faithful singing their hymns of praise and resilience.

In 1987, when the congregation moved across town and left their historic Spanish Revival building empty, Parker Robinson had already established herself as a master and teacher of dance—having collaborated with artists from the likes of Maya Angelou and Alvin Ailey (whose signature work *Revelations*, considered a national treasure, is inspired by his experience growing up in a Black church). She arranged for a long-term lease of one dollar per year with the Detroit Housing Authority. And for the past thirty-five years, she and her dancers have brought their own spiritual expressions into that sacred space almost every day. "That's where I bring everything I know, I want, or desire, all of my thoughts, my heart, my soul," she said of the dancer's stage. "I bring it. I bring it here."

Yet another fire—or bombing—was the inspiration for Parker Robinson's 2003 collaboration with David Rossiter, titled "One Nation Under a Canopy, Part 2: 24 Hours in Birmingham". In 1963, the dynamite planted by the KKK tore through the wall of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls and injuring over twenty members of the African American congregation. Rossiter and Parker Robinson's tribute layered and history—spoken over the choreography—with Motown classics in a setting of cinematic vignettes recalling the Black experiences of injustice and violence in Birmingham during that time.

So, when Jacqueline Lyle, Executive Director of the organization Performing Arts Serving Acadiana (PSAA), reached out to Parker Robinson in 2019 about creating a dance work inspired by the church burnings in St. Landry Parish, the choreographer didn't hesitate. "I've been through work over the last fifteen years to know about the hurtings of churches," she said. Immediately, she started to meditate on how to create such a work so that it comes out of that community. "not in the past, but right now," she said. "How do we bear their voices and change this history that keeps repeating itself?"

"Crisis," St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church. Port Barre, Louisiana, March, 2015."

Persisting at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House in Denver on September 11, *Sacred Spaces?* is a revolutionary collaboration between PHX, the Clair Parker Robinson Ensemble, and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra—funded by the National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America Grant, an Arts Forward grant from the Association of Performing Arts Professionals, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the Ford Foundation.

All of these entities have come together to tell the story of St. Mary Missionary, Greater Union, and Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist churches—and the man who burned them to the ground. But it is not a story of loss and violence alone.

"It's about healing," Parker Robinson explained. "It's extraordinary to think about, how do people heal? We are all hurting, even if we didn't come from that community ... How do we, as a society, heal?"

"Interior, Sunday", Mount Pleasant Baptist Church. April, 2015.

To take away a church is to break open the heart of a community, to dancerse divinity, to rid someone of their safest place. Church arson has been a feature of American violence since our country's earliest history, and continues to make headlines to this day. According to a 2015 report from the National Fire Protection Association, roughly five fires were intentionally set in religious institutions per week during the period of 2007 to 2011.

When it comes to Black congregations, though, the act of arson represents a particular sort of threat. A long history of white supremacists' affinity for fire, particularly during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, has imbued the burning of African American places of worship with a universally-recognizable message of hate.

On Tuesday, April 5, 2015—five days after the third fire—the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives discovered a piece of a gas can in the ruins at Mount Pleasant. This led to the arrest and eventual conviction of Holden Matthews, a twenty-one-year-old white man from the area, who confessed to setting the fires as part of his efforts to establish himself as a "black metal" musician. According to Matthews, the acts were meant to be a tribute to a mass attack on Christian churches that took place in Norway by individuals associated with the genre. On November 2, 2020, he was sentenced to twenty-five years in federal imprisonment and ordered to pay over two million dollars in restitution to the three churches.

In June, Lyle invited Parker Robinson to Acadiana to meet with the affected congregations directly, so to best inform the creative work. Members of the St. Landry Parish community gathered inside St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church's Fellowship Hall, where Sylvester's congregation has held their services for the past few years while their church is rebuilt twice down.

The conversation was moderated by Theodore Tonet, Ph.D.—an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana Lafayette specializing in African American history, Civil Rights memory, and Black studies—who invited individuals present to share their experiences, reactions, and reflections on the violence that had occurred in 2015.

One man, an electrician at one of the churches, shared the guilt that he had felt in the immediate aftermath of the fires—believing it to have been his fault somehow. Sylvester spoke, along with his wife, about their experiences. A congregant told the story of how he had learned about the fires while working offshore, sitting in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, watching on a computer screen as the flames destroyed the church his family had attended for four generations.

They spoke of their frustration that the crowns had not recognized the arsonist as a racially-motivated crime, but merely designated intentional arson—how that designation erased their visceral experience as the newest victims in a long legacy of fires set by white men with hate in their hearts. "We're in our house," said the offshore worker. "But a lot of it is extreme trauma."

The central theme explored that night at St. Mary's, though, was forgiveness. As a community bonded by their faith in a merciful God, they asked themselves and each other: how do we find it in our hearts to forgive the man who did this?

Reverend Gerald Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Missionary shared his struggle. "As a Black man, you know, sometimes you get tired of forgiving. We get tired. Tired ... I can get to a spot where I don't want to forgive. I don't want to. I want to be mad. But then, the Lord taps me on the shoulder, and says 'Boy, you can't do this. You've got to preach the whole word. You've got to teach the people how to live.'"

Even still, he said, the question haunts him. "Why do we keep having to forgive so much?"

"Sacred Rail", Greater Union Baptist Church, April 2015.

The next day, in Lafayette, Parker Robinson hosted a movement class for local dancers to participate in a way to process, through dance, the stories she had heard the night before, using early drafts of compositions from the new dance. In attendance were Kyle Sylvester's three daughters, all of them dancers. "Oh, and they touched my heart," said Parker Robinson. "I couldn't even cream because I sat there in awe, thinking 'You young people have gone through this, and you are here to show us how to do it...' I just said, 'We're going to need the entire village.' You gotta look at the babies. You gotta look to the elders. Ask the ancestors. But all of this has to come together. And we cannot ignore what the young ones are telling, what they're seeing, and what they're going to teach us."

Parker Robinson's visit ended with one more community discussion, this time held at the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette. Joined the way joined by Adonis Rose, Artistic Director of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. This event, in comparison to the one in Port Barre, was mostly attended by Acadiana residents outside of the St. Landry Parish communities—people who had heard about the fires, but were not directly impacted. One woman stood up, and shared that through the war not part of these congregations, the act of violence against houses of worship had struck her to her core.

"I get emotional thinking about it," she said. "Because there were so many prayers that were up at that altar, and so many unions. So many people who were there, in that place, and for them to be inflicted at that ... You know you can go [into a church] and be so vulnerable and not be judged and be welcome with love no matter what, and to have an outsider trying to decide that future for you and your family and your place of worship ..."

This expression of empathy—this continued conversation—is what this project is about at its core, Lyle explained. Not only can the dance work carry such a impressive discussion on hatred and race, and the history of violence against place of worship, and on forgiveness and redemption—

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it, as art, can also form connections. It can induce powerful empathy, which can be used as a collective tool towards healing.

This is something that Parker Robinson has dwelt on in a very personal manner over the last six months, following the death of her husband Tom Robinson in April. In the final days of his battle with cancer, she would sit beside his bed at the hospital—the music and ideas for *Sacred Spaces?* in hand. "There was no way I could split my spirit," she said.

In this way, this project centered on healing has emerged from the choreographer's own healing process. "I have been able to think about it, this mourning, in a way I had never thought about it," she said. "How do people heal? We heal because people collectively wish it for you. And I think that's what happens when we create something like this, and bring it to the audience."

GUERNIE FLEMING CAFFERY.

"Holy Bible," Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, April, 2019.

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For New Orleans Jazz Orchestra's Artistic Director Adonis Rose—who has worked with some of jazz's biggest names and performed on many of the world's most prominent stages—*Sacred Spaces?* ventures into new territory. This is the first time the Grammy-award winning composer has written music for dancers—though he says it will not be his last. "I've really really enjoyed this process," he said. "It's been enlightening, and I've had the opportunity to find things out about myself as a composer."

He described his approach to the music as an effort to bring together elements of Louisiana, of spirituality, of the African American church, and of mourning. "I had to sit down and think about how I wanted to structure it to where it followed the narrative of the story," he said. "So I started at the beginning, at the very beginning, and tried to put myself in the shoes of the guy who was burning the churches, and then also try to put myself in the position, emotionally, of the people of the congregations were when it was happening."

The work functions, conceptually, as a New Orleans funeral procession, divided into three parts: death, burial, and resurrection. "You know, you show up at the funeral home, you play a dirge. It starts out real slow. You have the family of the deceased, and the friends in the community following the procession. And then people have their chance to mourn. And then the dirge picks up as a procession goes along. Ultimately, you get to a place where you're celebrating the person that passed, their life and their achievements and what that person meant to you."

Musically, Rose incorporates African drum rhythms, the high-energy of a New Orleans brass band, and aspects of a gospel ballad. When I spoke with him in August, he mentioned that he was trying to work in elements of St. Landry's Zydeco culture into the instrumentation. "There are different elements of the music, representing myself and how I felt about the piece," he said. "But we want it to have global appeal, too. We're talking about sacred spaces and places of worship all over the world."

One piece in the second section of the work, he said, is inspired by Sylvester's daughters—and a comment made by one of the community members at the ACA talk. "She used a phrase and it stuck with me," he said. So, he used that phrase for the ballad's title: "The Children are Watching."

Following the *Sacred Spaces?* premiere in Denver this month, stay tuned for PASA's announcement of the production's eventual touring dates, when the Cleo Parker Robinson Ensemble and New Orleans Jazz Orchestra will travel to Acadiana to present the work to the communities that inspired it. Details at cleoparkerdance.org and thenojo.com.

**Quotes from the June meetings at St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church and the Acadiana Center for the Arts were sourced from a transcript made by Joe Riehl, provided by PASA.*

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