

Howard Zinn's "Voices of a People's History" brings light to great Americans

Written by Brandie Hill and Titilayo Bediako
Wednesday, 29 April 2009 15:26



War, ravage, killings, murder; those are the words we hear on the news; whether it's in reference to Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa or even our own neighborhoods. These words were not used, however, at the O'Shaughnessy Auditorium during the 3rd annual Arts for Peace Fundraiser for the Nonviolent Peaceforce, Voices of a People's History by Howard Zinn.

People's History of the United States uses live performances to bring life to the astonishing history of ordinary Americans who've built the movements that ended chattel slavery and segregation, advanced women's rights and gay liberation as well protest the genocide of the Native Americans.

The Nonviolent Peaceforce was founded in 1999 as a nonprofit organization that works with over 95 member organizations on five continents. They train civilians to be unarmed, nonpartisan peacekeepers. When local people in conflict situations ask for peacekeepers, those peacekeepers use their status as visitors to bear witness, negotiate, and shield people from harm.

An extraordinary array of talents presented this history, including Lou Bellamy, Isabell Monk O'Connor, and Melvin Carter, III.

An African American giant in Minnesota, Lou Bellamy, the founder and Artistic Director of the Penumbra Theatre Company, presented a compelling and powerful reading of Frederick Douglass's, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro." He adamantly read, "What to the American slave is our 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, our sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parades and solemnity, are, to Him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour," the crowd roared with approval."

Actor, artist and mentor, Isabell Monk O'Connor read Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman". When she read, it felt like the resurrection of Truth herself. O'Connor had all the tonality and gestures that one would imagine Truth used during her delivery at the Women's Convention in Akron, OH, in 1851. She read: "Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have

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as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."

The crowd laughed and begged for more as she completed the reading: "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."

Melvin Carter III, Ward One Council Member for the city of St. Paul, totally impressed his audience with his rendition of, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's, "Where Do We Go From Here?" He recited: "Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality integrated education. Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity. Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Carter had the audience up on their feet screaming, "Amen."

The program concluded with the dynamic and powerful Jearlyn Steele who sang, "If I had a Hammer." Only she has the power of turning a song like "If I had a Hammer" into a revival. She shook the hands of all the participants on the stage, she had her audience clapping their hands, greeting their neighbors and believing that they all could create a brighter future.