

Parallel destinies:

notes from a collaboration between

**John Dowell, Germaine Ingram,
and Bobby Zankel**

This year, PFP's long-running "Art Happens Here" artist residency program is supporting a multi-disciplinary collaboration among tap dancer/choreographer Germaine Ingram, jazz composer/saxophonist Bobby Zankel, and photographer/print-maker John Dowell. The three artists are creating choreography, music, and visual environments commemorating nine Africans enslaved in the President's House, Philadelphia's White House during George Washington's presidency. Their collaboration occurs shortly after an excavation of that site occurred, stimulated by prolonged public discussion about how this national and local history should be commemorated. In this very live context, the three artists are exploring how art in general and African diaspora traditions in particular can offer distinct means of imagining the meanings of this place, and the people who lived there. The project encourages reflection on the implications of slavery's practice in America's first seat of government, and on our own responsibilities in the light of this history. The excerpts that follow are drawn from conversations recorded

at rehearsals and public discussions sharing preliminary work at the Community Education Center (on November 13, 2009) and at the African American Museum of Philadelphia (on December 11, 2009). In addition to the principal artists, dance ensemble members include Alexandria Bradley, Maurice Chestnut and Karen Callaway Williams. Musicians include Daniel Blackburg (trombone), Ruth Naomi Floyd (voice), Tom Lawton (piano), Mogauwane Mahoele (percussion) Craig McIver (drums), Bryan Rogers (tenor sax), and Anthony Tidd (bass). This phase of the project has been supported by the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, through Dance Advance, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. John Dowell's involvement has been supported through a study leave and a grant in aid of research from Temple University.

Beginnings

Joyce Wilkerson: [was Chief of Staff for then-mayor John Street]: I got involved with the President's



House around the time of the opening of the Liberty Bell Pavilion. We set up an oversight committee comprised of people from across the city who had really protested and demonstrated and done the research to get the project done, and we worked collaboratively with them and the Park Service. We had decided to fund the excavation. But there was no reason, really, to do it. All the research indicated there was not likely to be anything revealed there because the site had been built over so many times. There were people that were concerned with disturbing the ancestors on the one hand. And on the other hand, a lot of the demonstration was about, literally, covering up history.

Jed Levin: [is National Park Service archaeologist, and one of several scholars with whom the artists consulted as part of their

background research]: The people of Philadelphia made this project happen. The National Park Service was definitely reticent to tell this story. This project is about people claiming their history and uncovering a forgotten and suppressed memory. From a technical side, excavators faced the possibility of finding a whole lot of nothing while a whole lot of people were watching. But we came to the conclusion that even if we didn't find anything, the very fact of looking shows the significance of the story. And by looking, we were showing respect. We had no idea that the foundation of the kitchen house, where Hercules was enslaved, still existed. The extraordinary thing is when you stood on that platform, and you looked down, you saw the curving bowed window associated with the President, and six feet away you saw where one of the men he had enslaved worked. You couldn't have

had a more powerful symbol of the intertwined nature of freedom and slavery in our history as what you saw looking down from that platform. And it spoke to people in ways that words alone don't convey. It was immediately understandable by people viewing the site. It was undeniable to our viewers.

Joyce Wilkerson: And then, near the end of that, it occurred to me that we were about to fill in the hole where the excavation happened, and we really hadn't done anything with it. You know, there had been hundreds of thousands of people that had looked at the site. Over three hundred thousand people visited the site, and the archaeologists had a platform, and they had this wonderful dialogue going on. And we contracted with John Dowell to make some photographs. It was all very fortuitous.

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Photo: "The Dinner Party," by John Dowell, created as part of the President's House/Parallel Destinies project. Courtesy of the artist.

John Dowell: And then Joyce introduced me to Jed Levin, the National Park Service archaeologist. I started trying to photograph it, and I couldn't shoot it the way I wanted in the daytime. So I started shooting at two o'clock in the morning. But they would cover the site up at the end of the day. And Jed and Patty, his wife, would go down at eleven o'clock at night and uncover the site so I could shoot. And then, Jed and I having our discussions as usual, and he said, "You know, we just gotta show the hypocrisy of the whole thing." He kept saying, "You gotta show the relationship." So then, I got on top of the Wachovia Building, and shot it from a block away. And I put the Constitution Center, the Visitors Center, but also the Justice Building in back, also. And that took quite a bit to engineer. And I actually found a window in the Bourse building where I could see the Liberty Bell, and you could see it and Independence Hall in one photograph. Those were the two. But I had a lot of emotional encounters dealing with that, shooting that thing at night. And that's the impetus of putting the project together. And then I started talking to Bobby about it.

Bobby Zankel: I was considering trying to create and try to fund a number of interdisciplinary projects and the idea of focusing on the President's House seemed like the best one to me. Then I called John and Germaine.

John Dowell: He said, "Oh yeah, we could do the thing!" And then Bobby got ahold of Germaine, and we all started talking. And we all started doing research. And so it's been expanding ever since. And I'm very excited about it because it's taken me out of where I normally would be. I'm really feeding off of Bobby and Germaine, back and forth, and back and forth. But how does one paint courage? You know,

how do you have that emotion? How do you paint the wonder? You know, I mean, we are here!

Germaine Ingram: One of the things Jed Levin said was, here you had this black hole and emerging from this black hole is a sort of awe, a kind of wonder, that encouraged people to see things—to see history in different ways, to ask different questions, to challenge the conventions that we've all believed in or, that were completely irrelevant on our radar. And that juxtaposition of this notion of black hole and awe and wonder is just a powerful image for all of us.

Bobby Zankel: This site is so filled with images and people's lives and history. And the whole story of America is sort of in that hole, you know—the good, the bad, and the ugly, and the potential for good and bad. So it really struck me very deeply. I guess for me the issue is what those slaves are thinking about. I was most interested in the mind of how people could endure slavery, and what it's about. But the scholars [Jed Levin, Katrina Hazzard Donald, Guy Ramsey, Danny Dawson] all talked about understanding how that African American culture emerged in the United States, and it's such an amazing triumphant story, that it really, really gripped me. And really understanding the complexity—especially in the year of Obama—seeing this grand thing of America's history, it's really so fascinating. And we all benefited from the research of Edward Lawler who has found these biographies of nine slaves in that house. We know their names. We know things about them. At first I was thinking of the slaves. One would be Dignity—you know, as sort of archetypes. But even better than archetypes is to be human beings that have descendents. Those nine slaves are really the fathers of the country. So, trying to deal with this—I'm not a period musician, you know. I'm a modern musician, so I wasn't

interested in doing—and I think we all agreed on this—a period piece, but yet the idea of trying to create a narrative without a thorough text! Music is about notes. Dance is about movement. But to really make them convey this complex story and these complex emotions without just saying "This happened, and that happened, and he did this, and he did that" is so challenging and really exciting.

John Dowell: Yeah, we all talked about this in the very beginning. We have an idea but we're not illustrators. And how can we use this to really build something that goes beyond the story, and to be inspiring. . .

Germaine Ingram: At first, we knew more about what we didn't want this to be than actually what we wanted it to be. It really gave us this opportunity to try out ideas, to explore, to sort of bump up against each other's perspectives and ideas on how to express what we're feeling about this important place and important event. But one thing we all agree on is that it needs to be very place-based. Not site-specific, but place-based. We want it to tap into the specificity of the site, and not just have it be about nine slaves at any place. That's one of the reasons that John's images are just such a unique asset to this—the original images, the way he's manipulated them, and the way that he's sort of using those images to evoke other images and spirits and provocations.

John Dowell: Spirits, that's it!

Germaine Ingram: We know a little bit about these slaves, and it creates a situation where there's both a license to imagine what they did and what they felt, but also a responsibility not to be ahistorical or stupid about what we try to convey about them and their lives.

John Dowell: What I did is that I took the original photographs and I went to cyanotypes, 'cause that blue thing is a strange feeling for me. So I did those first. And then I started finding out a little about ring shouts, And then I start having all these imaginations about different things. I imagined that when George went away, Hercules performs. I know he would cook a magnificent meal. Like that portrait of him— he would just do his thing. So to me, that was sort of very inspiring image-wise. So I did the cyanotypes. And then I start thinking about doing some paintings and then drawings about imaginary things. I kept thinking there's a wonder thing. Like, they were paying respects. I mean, of course, when you're having parties among the [enslaved Africans there], and there's also communication— people getting ready to run away or not, and transmitting information back and forth. It made me conjure up all these kinds of things. And that's how I started painting. And then I did a bunch of drawings. Every time we have a rehearsal I make more notes. . .

Germaine Ingram: My approach to this was to try to explore that internal space of the slaves. It feels like Bobby's sort of been dealing with banner issues: destiny, dignity and persistence. And I've been trying to tease out those sort of fine grain moments— what it felt like for Oney Judge to comb Martha Washington's hair every night. What's that combination of loyalty and resentment that drove that relationship? What did it feel like in that moment when Hercules was making the decision as to whether he was going to forsake his family at Mt. Vernon, to run and take the chance that he'd never see them again. What might've happened on the day when the slaves began to whisper to one another about the fact that Oney Judge had run? So, those are some of the circumstances, the moments, that I'm trying to imagine and interpret through percussive dance. I want to

use this as an opportunity to explore different kinds of foot coverings. Maurice Chestnut, who's another dancer who's working with me on this— I'm exploring with him a dance that represents that moment with Hercules, and we've talked about having him dance on coarse salt, which relates back to the convention of tap dancers dancing on sand, but it has a different kind of resonance in this context. So, those are some of the ideas I'm playing with. . .

Bobby Zankel: I really felt the need to try to create a narrative, and to make this like a long form, rather than a series of vignettes, which is a whole other challenge as a composer for the kind of thing that we're trying to do. Again, we're so early in the process, this is just—in my mind we may not hold to any of this. But I have this sort of an arc of pieces that begins things.

Excerpts

Naming names

*My name is Oney Judge,
I ran for freedom.*

*My name is Christopher
Sheels, I can read and write.*

*My names is Richmond,
I got caught planning.*

*My name is Hercules,
chef dandy freeman.*

My name is Austin, a mixed race waiter.

My name is Paris, I cleaned his stable.

My name is Moll, I saw him dying.

My name is Giles, I drove his wagon.

*My name Joe Richardson,
I got my kids free.*

Bobby Zankel: You know, there's so many levels. This story is just profoundly interesting and evocative. One big way to look at is just the idea of destiny. How does somebody come and have their body and their lives taken from one continent to another continent and adjust? What forces interplay? What is the idea of destiny? Are we blind victims of fate or do we have control? Are we empowered over our own lives? What's the story there? And I think the actions of those slaves, particularly Oney Judge and Hercules, who we know escaped, are expressed in this song, and the punchline is, "My destiny belongs to me."

*Liberty or love,
Broken heart but freedom.
Touch my Delia's tender cheek
Hold my rascal Richmond nea...
Or write myself a destiny
That takes me God knows where.
Strut my dandy ways,
Or live each day in shadows.
Where's the justice in a world
That makes a prideful negro choose...
'Tween hearth and wretched cave,
Between fugitive and slave?*

Germaine Ingram: That's the beginning of the song that will be the basis for this dance on salt that will take place in a sort of very small space. I'm thinking a costume that is a cross between chef's coat and straight-jacket, so that the movement is very contained, until he [Hercules] ultimately makes the decision to leave.

*I combs her hair
Most every night.
Teasin' de nits and tangles,
Frein' dem steely barbs.
I combs her hair
Most every night
Scared dat she fuss and holla,
Yell that I tugs too hard.
I combs her hair,*

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*I combs her hair
Most every night.*

*In the full moon I dreams
That I's a hoodoo.
And I takes dem fallen
 strands and winds a trick
That makes her set me free.
But still I combs her hair
Most every night.
Gently I ease the tangles.
Gently I combs her hair.*

*I wears her scent
From chin to foot.
Serving all day the white folk
Seeps in my every root.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.
Blind man to tell between us
For him be hard to know.
I wears her scent.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.*

*When I be's wid my man
He treats me cold.
He turn his head away
And say I smells like
 massa's hound dog.
On a stormy day,
I scrub my limbs 'til knuckles fray*

*But missy's scent
No missy's scent
Don't go away.*

Reflections

Joyce Wilkerson: I think one of the struggles working with the President's House and wanting to focus on the lives of the enslaved Africans, was trying to figure out what they thought— why they did what they did. And so, for me, this is very powerful, because you know you don't know. And to have people actually go into their lives and think and try to figure it out is a real gift. We've worked with the historians and just have the tiniest bit of real, hardcore, documented evidence. So it's a gift to have you really explore it for us.

Dottie Wilkie: I mean, the last song you sung, I know you put me there. It put me there. You know, I felt that. And the last piece that he did, the last song, "Destiny," I feel that also. And the music— "I'm free, but am I free? Where am I?"

Joyce Wilkerson: And then, with John's artwork—there's the role of place, and how important is

the foundation? And is it the end, or is it just a jumping off point for understanding what actually happened at the house? And so, to have it filled in kind of puts the place in perspective. Having John just use the place as a starting point, and filling in some of what happened is very powerful.

Germaine Ingram: That's one of our motivations here— that giving people this additional window, the window of art, as a way into this topic, will inspire them to learn more, to think more, to consider what their individual responsibility is with regard to this significant body of history that was covered for so long.

Bobby Zankel: We're all abstract artists. And on the one hand we have the responsibility to tell a story with integrity, but yet, it's not going to be a period piece or a historical drama. We hope that the emotions and the feelings and the content will create and generate a feeling. It might make you just want to go and read a book about it, just because you might've loved the piece. You didn't know what it had to do with the President's House,

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zither], and a trumpet, or whatever. When the Chieftains went to China, they took Irish instruments and played along with the Chinese instruments. They realized that they were the same—the two sets of instruments had very similar timbres, and they played the same keys, D and A. The erhu, the two strings are the D and A strings; it's the two middle strings of the violin.

ES: The contemporary music conservatories in China are relatively new, aren't they? I mean, 50 or 75 years ago, you didn't go to conservatory to learn erhu, did you?

KJ: It depends. There was formal education in music in China at one time. Under the communist rule, when they destroyed everything they

thought was bourgeois, the fancier instruments were considered the instruments of the rich, and they destroyed them. Had it not been for Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, where a lot of musicians escaped to—they preserved that culture...

ES: Especially the court music, would you say?

KJ: Yes, the court music. So the more expensive instruments, the one that Anna Chan plays, the guzheng—that's a court instrument. That was originally developed by monks and brought into the imperial court very early. There's a little bit about that history [in my book]. The erhu was not in the imperial court during the earlier times. As a matter of fact, they thought it was a toy [laughs].

That particular instrument came out of the folk arena. If you go to China, you'll see people—the only way I can describe is by comparing it to a guitar—you'll see people in the villages there, sitting in the park, with one erhu playing and people singing along with it. I also saw that in Beijing. That certainly didn't come from formal education on that particular instrument. But it eventually entered into the imperial court, and that's when you got the blend of the folk and the slow imperial court music. The instrument I play didn't enter in until the 1600s. That's pretty late for

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with Confucianism—it was a patriarchal society trying to impose on a matriarchal society. People lost land, lost their property, lost their heritage. They revolted, and that’s why. The women started to revolt.

Today, when you look at farmland, the women are always going out to the market and going out to trade. The man has to stay home to till the land, to keep the thing in place. That’s his job. The diplomatic job is for women. All of this is linked to that simple verse. It has a depth to it; it has a reason to it. That was a nice discovery, when I went to the boat and I found out how things work. It’s practical, it’s natural, and there’s no discussion about it.

Resources for further exploration

Douglas, Gavin. 2010. *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Duy, Pham. 1975. *Musics of Vietnam*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Nguyen, Phong. 1998. “Vietnam” and

“*Minority Musics of Vietnam*,” in Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of Music, vol. 4: Southeast Asia*. New York: Garland.

Le đàn tranh: musiques d’hier et d’aujourd’hui. 1994. Paris: Ocora Radio France.

Music from Vietnam and Cambodia. 1999. EUCD 1547. ARC Music Productions.

Notes

¹ A National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) offensive in 1968 that was widely seen as a turning point in the war, leading to U.S. withdrawal.

² Ch Nôm is the ancient “ideographic vernacular script” of the Vietnamese language (<http://nomfoundation.org>). For a thousand years—from 939 CE, when Vietnam won its independence from China, into the 20th century—much of Vietnamese literature, philosophy, history, law, medicine, religion, and government policy was written in Nôm script. This heritage is now nearly lost: fewer than 100 scholars worldwide can read Nôm. Nhàn has been a leading scholar in its preservation. See <http://nomfoundation.org/index.php> and http://www.temple.edu/vietnamese_center/NomScript/index.htm for some of Nhàn’s work in this area.

³ Cải lương is a form of dance-drama that, beginning in urban Vietnam in the early 1900s, updated classical theater in combination with amateur art music. The “reformed theater” incorporated stories from many sources. The primary instrumental accompaniment was an ensemble of Vietnamese strings, but Western instruments were also used.

⁴ Vietnam has 53 ethnic minorities, four major language areas, and a wide variety of regional musical traditions.

⁵ See their website <http://www.myspace.com/peelingnyc>

⁶ Nhàn is one of the musicians on the Billy Bang recording *Vietnam: Reflections*. See <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=18185>. Nhàn was organizing and educating about Agent Orange in this era as well. See <http://www.vn-agentorange.org/index.html>

⁷ Ca trù is a type of chamber music for poetry, with claps, đàn đáy (a four-string lute), đàn tranh. The lead singer, usually a woman, takes any poem from the audience and puts it into a song. She paces the song with the claps and leads the other instruments.

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but now you know there’s a President’s House because your feelings were stimulated. I think many of us respond to art emotionally. The kind of thing we do – modern jazz and percussive dance and John’s paintings— are not literal. So we may not be the best place to get the full story, but we would like to be a place where you can get an emotional catharsis, and then be stimulated to do the research about this. That’s the way I see it.

Ife Nii-Owoo: I want to remember, in particular, that experience. I want to learn the lessons of that experience and understand how I can move above and beyond that experience. And what I have learned from that experience, and what I have read and studied, is that we as African American people have gotten out of there, and only through a great struggle, we have been able to reach out of that experience to become accepted as human beings and as full citizens in this country.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild: It’s not even about the President’s House, but about us “in the President moment.” And us in the present moment. And us finding a way through the art that moves us. What does it mean to be a person of color living in a non-post-racist moment? And what does it mean to be a white person living in a non-post-racist moment?

None of the quotations or lyrics included here can be used or quoted without express permission of the artist or speaker.

For more information about the President’s House excavation, see:

Avenging the Ancestor’s Coalition: <http://avengingtheancestors.com/>

City of Philadelphia. *The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation*: <http://www.phila.gov/presidentshouse/>

Lawler, Edward. *The President’s House in Philadelphia*: <http://www.ushistory.org>

