

Why Judson Memorial? or, Thoughts about the spiritual attitudes of my work*

© Lorraine O'Grady 1982

In writing a proposal to perform *Rivers* at Judson Memorial Church, a venue with important avant-garde history, O'Grady unexpectedly reached greater clarity on the spiritual aspects of her work, especially its forms.

I have purely performance reasons for wanting to do RIVERS at Judson Memorial. The first is my feeling that RIVERS is important, ambitious work which should play in a significant space. A more practical reason is the spatial requirement of the piece itself. RIVERS is designed on the ancient theme of The Crossroads (particularly important in Haitian Voudoun). It needs an upper and lower playing level, so the piece can develop on a visual vertical while, at the same time, having a horizontal line that clearly divides "above" from "below." The raised altar of Judson's sanctuary would provide this. In addition, the piece's deliberately tempestuous soundtrack demands good acoustics. Though not perfect, Judson would work well.

Another reason for my choice of Judson has to do with the content of the piece. Although the work for which I've become known is heavily political, throughout all of it there has been an underpinning of religious concern — as in the funeral ritual of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, or the water symbolism and hymn singing of *Rivers, First Draft*. Sometimes the religious concern disappears into the purely aesthetic — for instance, the chasuble-like design of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire's cape. As a child of Jamaican immigrants, I was raised an Anglo-Catholic, or High

* From a letter to Judson Memorial Church dated 10.27.82.

Episcopalian, and I have been permanently influenced by the church's attitude toward ritual and form.

The "religious attitude" is an involuntary aspect of my mental landscape. I've long since renounced the church, but my life and work are marked by a quest for "wholeness," a variant, I guess, of the old spiritual search for significance in the cosmos. As a good post-modernist, I undertake the quest for "wholeness" and "meaning" knowing that it's doomed. But I can't help harboring a secret hope that I will be able to achieve psychological and artistic unity. The predominant aesthetic of my work is that of collage,, i.e. of disparate realities colliding, of fragmentation and multiple points of view (I teach a course in Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism at SVA), but with me, the collage aesthetic reflects a desire to unify and contain *everything*. It isn't intended to be merely descriptive; it is never a capitulation to the fragmentation and division.

The governing aim of my work is the reconciliation of opposites, and my subject matter often deals with this explicitly, as in the reconciliation between past and present in *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*; between the West Indies and New England in *Rivers, First Draft*; and between aspects of the divided self in *The Dual Soul* and *Indivisible Landscapes*. In the work's form as well, I try to create work that is both abstract and concrete, which is to say, both formally beautiful and capable of delivering specific intellectual and political content. I try to find formal ways to combine an obsession with autobiography and the inner life of dream and myth with my attitude of political intransigence (you might say I am both a Jungian and a Marxist in my fashion). But the work proceeds in this direction only awkwardly: I am aiming for the "perfect balance" between personal and political, abstract and concrete, and whenever the work is too heavily weighted toward one or the other — which it most often is — I feel that I have failed. But I keep trying to juggle all of these elements.

Although I hope to make *RIVERS* a much less personal and a more political piece than was *Rivers, First Draft*, at the same time, my main reason for wanting to perform it at Judson Memorial is my even greater desire to have both the personal

and political content of the piece interact so strongly with the religious nature of the church's space that they will produce a result larger than either the personal *or* the political.