



Sojourner Truth Dance. Abbey, Pennsylvania (De Sola Collection)

22. Sojourner Truth, Developing the Dance

[De Sola wished to speak on Sojourner Truth a second time with some of the same ideas and some other ideas, but in this version, De Sola held up some of the costumes to be seen.]

CDS: I'd like to say a few more words about Sojourner Truth. We did [the dance], perhaps in the 1980s, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and redid [it] out in Berkeley for several occasions here. [It was] based on the life of Sojourner Truth, "a black slave woman who obtained freedom of both body and spirit, she traveled up and down the lands proclaiming the abolition of slavery and advocating women's rights" [*Sojourners* magazine].

It began when I opened up a magazine called *Sojourners*, it was named after Sojourner Truth, and read this stirring article on her by Joyce Holiday and I started weeping saying I want to do a dance one her, but how can I, a white woman do a dance on a black woman? Such an important part of black heritage. And I had two friends, both black women, a sculptress and an opera singer. We sometimes prayed together, and I said how can I do this dance? And they said if you feel it from within, do it, and we will back you up. So I did, and [I] gathered the group together. There were hard times, and I wrote up a whole little booklet on Sojourner Truth on her wonderful speeches [like] "Ain't I a Woman?" and different encounters [such as] when she encounters Jesus, and says, "I can love even the white man." There is so much richness there.

“Sojourner Truth,” A Dance Tribute

In a dance tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., the Omega Liturgical Dance Company presented a rehearsal of “Sojourner Truth.” The performance was a part of King’s Way: Realizing the Dream, a two-day celebration of Dr. King’s life and work, presented by Cathedral Arts at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City on January 16, 1988. Conceived and choreographed by Carla De Sola. Dancers: Maria Mitchell, Marie de la Palma, and Greg Reynolds. Narrator: Maria Mitchell. Special thanks to Allan Tung.

Sojourner Truth, “a black slave woman who obtained freedom of both body and spirit, . . . traveled up and down the lands proclaiming the abolition of slavery and advocating women’s rights” (*Sojourners* magazine).

She was “a black woman made steel by the searing white heat of slavery, made compassion by the tempering fire of God’s love.” (Joyce Hollyday)

Carla De Sola, the choreographer, was an artist-in-residence at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. She said, “In the 1980’s, I opened up a magazine called *Sojourners*, it was named after Sojourner Truth, and read this stirring article on her by Joyce Hollyday and I started weeping saying I want to do a dance on her, but how can I, a white woman do a dance on a black woman? Such an important part of black heritage. And I had two friends, both black women, a sculptress Inge Hardison and her friend Margaret McCain, an opera singer. We sometimes prayed together, and I said how can I do this dance? And they said if you feel it from within, do it, and we will back you up. So I did.

URL: <https://youtu.be/Z0hefNyA5WI>

In the first performance at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, my same friend Inge had her sculpture of Sojourner right in the aisle for everybody to walk by before the dance began and [also to walk by] afterward. I had a cast of three, an actress and two dancers, they were all dancers actually. Maria Mitchell, Greg (Christopher) Reynolds, and Maria De La Palme. Somehow I saw them all as different aspects of Sojourner. Then out here in the East [San Francisco] Bay [Area] when we did it—[and] also for some churches—there were three people: one dancer, one actor, and one singer, who added another dimension. Adrien Thorne was the dancer, Jacqueline Duhart was the actor, and JoAnne Henry the singer. I hope one day you can *see* “Sojourner Truth.” I also challenge you: Where do you see Sojourner Truth today?

[De Sola holds up parts of the costume.] So, I really hope that one day you will get to see the dance and you will see Sojourner’s cap and her dress, different slave dresses with the scarf around her. And also wrapped in a flag, the American flag; we had her wrapped for two dances in the production in New York, for the “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, and also here in California.

Dance as Diplomacy with Russians

“Soviet cosmonaut Gregory Grechko, who has been in outer space three times and for as long as ninety days, was overwhelmed by the experience. ‘It was the best night of my entire life. . . even outer space cannot top that’” (*Soviet-American News*). Grechko had participated in a night of citizen diplomacy, and a major component of that was a dance choreographed by Carla De Sola at St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City, February 9, 1988. Perhaps Carla De Sola’s dance was a small part of peacebuilding. The Soviet Union formally ceased on December 26, 1991. The previous day Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev had resigned and given Russian President Boris Yeltsin the nuclear missile launching codes. This marked the end of the Cold War when ordinary people of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union lived in fear of nuclear conflagration.

The Soviet cosmonaut Gregory Grechko spoke of an experience with the dance of De Sola’s company as the best night of his life. De Sola, similar to the cosmonaut, speaks of the “February Fling” with Soviet people as one of the best times in her life. Many people of the U.S. lived in fear of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. An announcement in the *New York Times*, February 9, 1988, invited people to St. John the Divine Cathedral: “An evening of music and dance, featuring Paul Winter, Paul Halley, the Omega Dance Company, the New York Russian Chorus and Tamir, A Russian actress, is planned tonight at 7:30 p.m.. Sponsored by the Center for Soviet American Dialogue, the performance is part of a two-week series of cultural and social events. . . The Temple of Understanding, an international organization based at the cathedral, will be the host for the evening”(New York Times, 1988).

An invitation pictured on the onion domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow read, “Join Soviet poets, dancers, actors, cosmonauts, scientists, educators, athletes, politicians, physicians, religious leaders, publishers, military staff, journalists, media reps, television personalities.” (Cathedral of St. John the Devine, 1988). These were people attending the Soviet-American Citizens Summit. U.S. citizens were invited to join them. The evening included a number of musical and dramatic parts including all holding candles. The printed program said, “Circle Dance for the Earth . . . Delegates will dance around the globe. Everyone is invited to participate with gesture or dance” (Cathedral of St. John the Devine, 1988).

The program of those participating in the February Fling mentioned the children from the Cathedral School and “Artists in Residence at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. Conception and choreography of this celebration by Carla De Sola and Marie Delapalme, with inspiration from dancers Stephen Coleman, Raymond G. Del Barrio, Marlyn Dolcetti, Holy Reeves Funston, Joan Henry, David McCauley, Laurie Nelseon, and Eddie Simon. Carla De Sola, Director. Art of the World designed by Sasha Illich.”

After the event, the Center for the Soviet-American Dialogue, based in Bellevue, Washington, sent De Sola a letter of appreciation, dated May 20, 1988:

How can we thank you enough for your expertise, the long hours you gave and the true spirit of love you showed in being a citizen diplomat. The Center’s staff is overwhelmed with follow-up to the Summit and the activity that has been created by the numerous joint projects. We recently returned from Moscow for joint project follow-up and are getting ready to go again. Our first edition of the “Soviet-American News” will include exciting reports on the Summit, and your copy is enclosed. Future issues will cover in-depth articles on “perestroika” and “glasnost”, with input from Soviet journalists. We always invite your input and suggestions and are looking forward to working together with you in our future endeavors. (Vernon & Hubbard, 1988)

The cover of the enclosed newspaper depicted the dancers with the earth ball. The cover read, “Soviets Honored at St. John the Divine Cathedral. Special Edition Soviet-American Citizens’ Summit. A New Way of Thinking: Social Invention for the Third Millennium.” Then the article described:

One evening, many of the Soviets met at the St. John the Divine Cathedral for an inter-religious service in celebration of the Third Millennium. The Master of Ceremonies for the evening was the Very Reverend James Morton, Dean of the Cathedral of St. JD. Daniel Anderson of the Temple of Understanding organized the event. The evening was beautifully orchestrated, bringing tears to the eyes when 1,000 people, including children and youth, lit candles with the Soviets in a gesture of peace and friendship. The high point of the extravaganza was when the earth seemed to float above the heads of the gathering as it floated down the aisle, gracefully choreographed on a moving platform by the Omega Liturgical Dance Company. Soviet cosmonaut Gregory Grechko, who has been in outer space three times and for as long as ninety days, was overwhelmed by the experience. ‘It was the best night of my entire life. . . even outer space cannot top that. (*Soviet-American News*).



SPECIAL EDITION
**SOVIET-AMERICAN
CITIZENS' SUMMIT**
A New Way of Thinking: Social Inventions for the Third Millennium

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a Social
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Soviets Honored at St. John the Divine Cathedral

One evening, many of the Soviets met at the St. John the Divine Cathedral for an inter-religious service in Celebration of the Third Millennium.

The Master of Ceremonies for the evening was the Very Reverend James Morton, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Daniel Anderson of Temple of Understanding organized the event.

Some of the many participants were Paul Winter, Paul Halley, Victor Cook, Alexander Gradsky and other Soviet artists and performers representing different denominations including the Russian Orthodox Church; the Jewish



Soviet-American Newspaper. (GTU Archives)

“February Fling,” A Soviet-American Celebration (Omega Liturgical Dance Company, 1988)

Choreographer: Carla De Sola. Assistant Choreographer: Marie de la Palma.

While the Cold War had many people of the United States and Russia living in fear, a two-week Soviet-American Citizens Summit was organized by the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue. As part of that, on February 9, 1988, the Temple of Understanding hosted the “February Fling.” The Temple of Understanding is an international interfaith organization based at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Many of Carla De Sola’s dances have invited people to seek compassion, justice, and peace. She has written a book, *PeaceRites*, edited by Thomas Kane. See some of her choreography, focused on peace-building, for the 30th anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Óscar Romero on March 27, 2010: <https://youtu.be/sDCrMWOMI3k>

See also the 60th anniversary of the United Nations on June 26, 2005: <https://youtu.be/r-ILJ4HBllc>

Credits: “Garden Of The Earth” - Paul Winter (sound recording, 2:05 - 4:22 play match, Independent Online Distribution Alliance [IODA], on behalf of Living Music. URL: <https://youtu.be/opiPE6pz7rU>

