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Palme, and Maria Mitchell share the “Sojourner Truth” dance at Dalesford Abbey, Dalesford, Pennsylvania. (GTU Archives)

21. Sojourner Truth

CDS: Thinking back of women who have inspired me to do dances, one of them is Sojourner Truth. That took a long time, and I was very pleased with the results. There were two different productions of it. To backtrack a moment, though, [let me add] just a line about Sojourner. The dance is based on the life of Sojourner Truth, “a black slave woman who attained freedom of both body and spirit. She traveled up and down the land proclaiming the abolition of slavery and advocating women’s rights” (*Sojourners* [magazine]).

It began when I opened *Sojourners* magazine and read a gripping story of her life by Joyce Holiday. I remember reading it on the floor in the studio at St. John the Divine, crying almost [and] saying this is so beautiful. I want to do a dance on her.

. . . Here is this woman with this deep voice making peace among a very disturbed crowd She’s just singing and singing and finally the agitators left this gathering. So, that got me thinking of dance and music and putting together something.

But how could I, a white woman, handle material that was so deeply a part of the Afro-American heritage? Well, I had two friends who lived in the neighborhood who were artists—Margaret [an opera singer] and Inge Hardison, two black women, and I went and visited them. We sometimes prayed together, and I went and visited them and they said, “If you feel it from

within, if you feel it in your heart, do it. We will back you.” Now Inge was also a sculptress and she had a sculpture of Sojourner, which we used with the first performance at St. John the Divine. This was down in the middle of the aisle, just there for people to see as they looked at the dance in the [cathedral] crossing.

So the first time we did “Sojourner [Truth]”, there was a cast of three. It was an actress, Maria Mitchell, and two dancers, Greg (Christopher) Reynolds [and] Marie de la Palme, a man and a woman who were both about the same size, tall and light. Somehow they became one person in my mind, which was a strange concept—at any rate I did it that way. And Sojourner—the narrator, Maria Mitchell, had on Sojourner’s cap and a dress. They all wore slave type of dresses. And I had an American flag altered a bit so it wouldn’t be scandalous if it was on the floor and draped around. They draped it around themselves when they became one person to do the famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech of Sojourner.

I leave you to read these speeches more. They are all there in the dance. “Ain’t I a Woman?”—I [have] forgot[ten] the exact gesture right now—but this is wrapped around them. Out here in Berkeley, we also performed another version that had one dancer, Adrien Thorne. Jacqueline Duhart was the actress. JoAnne Henry was the singer, and that was lovely—to add a live voice to the music, which was a mixture of all kinds of sounds and interesting. I have forgotten all the music right now, but to have a live voice added greatly to the production. And we did it with a workshop once in which we asked questions: Where is Sojourner today? Where do we see her? I remember seeing Sojourner once as a strong woman. Because her arms were black, she reminded me of a dance position, but she was lugging bags and bags of garbage—but proudly. But she didn’t have the articulate voice—or maybe she did and we would never know it. [I have] some [more] thoughts on Sojourner Truth.



De Sola and Rev. Adriene Thorne who danced “Sojourner Truth” when she was a student at Pacific School of Religion look at pictures in De Solas’ studio. Before becoming a minister Thorne had danced professionally with Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Workshop Ensemble. She integrates arts and ministry. (M. A. Kirk)

“Sojourner Truth” (portrayed by Maria Mitchell, directed by Carla De Sola)

On July 10, 2013, in an interview with Sister Martha Ann Kirk, Carla De Sola began talking about a woman who greatly inspired her: Sojourner Truth. De Sola said, “Here is this woman with this deep voice making peace among a very disturbed crowd. She’s just singing and singing, and finally, the agitators left this gathering. So, that got me thinking of dance and music and putting together something.” Through the years, De Sola has created a number of versions of this “Sojourner Truth” dance.

URL: <https://youtu.be/P97MRbsCY-I>