

FIRE IN MY BONES: A MEDITATIVE OPERA

By Deborah Phelps, Composer and Mary Ann Macklin, librettist

Cast Members

The Cat (Bodhi/Sophia/Sheba/Anthony) - Sonja Rasmussen
Elizabeth - Susan Swaney
James - Ray Fellman
Jimmy - Jake Woollen
Sandy Sasso - Kit Boulding
Jarena Lee - Reyna Carguill
The Devil - Paul Lane
Olympia Brown - Lauren Robert
Chan Miew Yee - Dee Lane
Wedding Couple - Doug Bauder & Marty Siegel

Instrumentalists

Piano - Sally Todd
Flute - Pam MacLaughlin
Clarinet - Michael Mattner
Violin - Richard Torstrick

2004 Responses

"Macklin and Phelps understand the power of art to challenge convention and, in rare instances, change lives. 'Fire in My Bones' is a gospel of liberal religion for the turn of this millennium – an exquisite meditative opera."

John Tolley, Meadville Lombard Seminary Professor

"This is our UU Passion story!" Denise Ogren (member, UU Church Bloomington, IN)

"An amalgam of wisdom and wit and inspiration. It's all about compassion." Peter Jacobi, The Herald Times

Fire In My Bones Origins and History

The creation of the meditative opera *Fire In My Bones* began with a Feminist Theology Award grant presented to Deborah Phelps and Mary Ann Macklin in the summer of 1996 from the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. The original production was performed as part of a seminary project with support from the Religion and Arts Committee of Christian Theological Seminary and in cooperation with the Edyean Theater in Indianapolis, IN. The original production on May 5, 1997, was a concert performance.

As part of their original grant proposal goals, composer Deborah Phelps and librettist Mary Ann Macklin explored through inquiry, archival research and personal interviews the theological and musical heritage of the operetta's four foremothers: Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (1947-), the second woman to be ordained a rabbi; Jarena Lee (1783-?), an African American preacher of the gospel; Reverend Olympia Brown (1835-1926), a Universalist minister and suffragette; and Chan Miew Yee (1903-?), a Buddhist nun in China,

Rewritten in the summer of 2003, with several new duets added, *Fire In My Bones* was produced at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, Indiana, in February of 2004. It was a fully-staged performance, designed and directed by Steve Krahne, and included several new members and instrumentalist parts. The enclosed CD was recorded with the cast members of this latest production.

Fire In My Bones Synopsis

It is the spring of 1991, and seminary student Elizabeth Severn laments her take home final exam as well as her status as a single parent to Jimmy, and her relationship to her brother James (*Prayer*). James, a biology teacher, and Jimmy enter the apartment singing the praises of the much-maligned dandelion (*Dandelion*). It is revealed that James has moved in with Elizabeth after being fired from his high school teaching position when it was discovered that he is HIV positive and gay. James, who is skeptical about Elizabeth's theological studies, receives a call from his doctor that his T-Cell count has dropped and he now has AIDS. James challenges Elizabeth, "What do you pray for now?"

Bodhi, the cat, observes the Severn family; and throughout the operetta she engages the audience in meditation. As part of these feline meditations, she travels back in time to her previous lives and wisdom gleaned from various owners/foremothers (*Come Follow Me*, Sandy Sasso Intro). A young Sandy Eisenberg shares with Bodhi/Sophia her yearnings to be a rabbi, and Bodhi brings the wisdom from Sandy forward to the Severn family (Sandy Sasso: *Prayer is More*).

In the summer of 1991, we find James and Elizabeth arguing about religion, homophobia, and Elizabeth's silent reluctance to take a stand in her congregation on behalf of gay rights. "It's too controversial right now." Elizabeth also accuses James of being careless in contracting AIDS. The argument erupts into a rage aria in which James recounts what it was like to grow up gay in a culture which condemns homosexuality (*The Rage Aria*).

Bodhi invites the audience into a quiet place of meditation (*Breathe*) and then introduces a new foremother (Jarena Lee Intro). As she writes her memoirs Jarena Lee tells Bodhi of her experience as an early 19th century African-American woman preacher of the gospel, and Bodhi returns to the Severn family with this wisdom (Jarena Lee: *A Fire In My Bones*).

Intermission

It is autumn of 1991, and Jimmy begins to realize that his Uncle James may die from AIDS (*Please Don't Leave Now*). Bodhi invites the audience into another meditation (*Breathe*), and introduces 19th century Universalist minister Olympia Brown (*Olympia Brown Intro*), who is in her beloved garden. Olympia recounts her preparatory years in ministry and then offers her thoughts on universal love (*Olympia Brown: Universal Love*); and Bodhi brings this message to the Severns.

James Severn dies in late autumn, and we join Jimmy and Elizabeth in the winter of 1991. Elizabeth, recently fired from her ministerial internship for presiding at the wedding of a gay couple, is busy grading seminary final exams for her new teacher's assistant position. Jimmy challenges her busyness with advice he learned from his Uncle James (*Live In Each Season*). Bodhi smiles and introduces Buddhist nun Chan Miew Yee. We join Chan Miew Yee in her convent in China, as she shares the wisdom of her elder years (*Chan Miew Yee: Religion is a Many-colored Lantern*). Bodhi returns to Elizabeth and Jimmy with Chan's message.

Elizabeth and Jimmy, while still missing James, find comfort in one another as we hear James' voice share some final thoughts from Thoreau (*Thoreau: My Friends*).

Fire In My Bones Libretto

Prayer (Elizabeth)

*Bodhi, if there's one thing I can't stand
It's a take home final exam!
I never feel like I can finish these exams for my seminary classes
Take this question for example:*

*"Please compare and contrast an ontological, existential
and theoretical understanding of prayer as related to a
post modern interpretation of a Tillichian model of correlation."
(I am so frustrated Bodhi! My mind reaches for prayer,
but nothing is there.)*

*Prayer, Prayer
How can I think about prayer?
Where are all the answers about prayer?
They must be in these books somewhere.
Perhaps there are no answers.
Perhaps there are only questions.*

*God, if there is a God,
Help my mind and all its churning,*

*Help me understand these lessons I am learning.
God, if there is a God,
Help me be a better mother to my son.
I don't spend enough time with him,
all these papers to be done!
God, if there is a God,
Help me support my brother.
Tell me this, am I his keeper?*

*I don't know.
I just don't know.*

God, If there is a God....

*Prayer. Prayer.
How can I think about prayer?
Where are all the answers?
They must be in these books somewhere.*

Much-Maligned Dandelion (James, Jimmy)

*Weed.
Flower.
Weed
Flower. Tell her Uncle James.*

*Weed. Flower. Weed. Flower.
I present this truth! It is both.
Remember, life is a paradox,
And then again its not.
It is indeed...a flower AND a weed.*

*Y'see, a weed is a small, wild, undesired plant
About which many folks like to rave and rant
(But why do they do...)
Because it crowds those plants that they desire
(But that's not...)
They like to hate this spring-time flower
(But Uncle James, the flower is so...)
But I choose to love the maligned dandelion
(How am I going to get him to listen to me!)
With its sturdy taproot that secures it underground.
(Uncle James! Uncle James!)
(He always does this.)
Why you ask
(Did I ask?)
why am I so, . . . I am so sentimental*

*about this jagged-leaf perennial?
Hey Jimmy, look at this!
Its essence misunderstood. Its gifts ignored.
Yet so resilient for a European import!
And they're everywhere
(Everywhere)
That's the problem
(Not really rare)
That's right Jimmy!
But each flower so special in its bloom
Opens with the sunrise
(Rests with the moon.)
(Look Uncle James,
There are hundreds of flowers all in one bloom!)
Yes, they are all connected,
And yet separate,
Ah, the much-maligned dandelion, your resiliency we hail!
To Europeans, an herb. To Chinese...do you remember Jimmy?
(They call it the earth nail)
Ah, the much-maligned dandelion, we hail your resiliency.
What was its Latin name?
("Taraxacum Officinale)")*

*Beware those labels that call it a weed
Or deem it undesirable with its plethora of seeds.
It has culinary delights! And medicinal powers!
Its gifts are endless.. This springtime flower.*

Sandy Sasso Introduction (Cat)

*The year is 1963
We are in the bedroom of my companion Sandy
She is 16 years of age
And already a bit of a sage.
When her friends have questions about God
They seek her guidance in the synagogue
She is often there with busy hands and eyes.
Watching the tradition modeled by the Rabbis.*

*This evening she returns from the festival of Shavuot
Where she was confirmed and blessed in her white robe.*

*She stands in the bedroom of her youth
And searches deep inside for truth.
She has received a white flower and Bible as gifts,
But I have one more present for her,
So I'll be back in a jif...*

Sandy Sasso "Prayer Is More?" (Sandy, Cat, Elizabeth, Jimmy, James)

In coming to services

We are confronted with four commandments

Thou shalt sing. Thou shalt rise.

Thou shalt read, and thou shalt be seated.

And we obey.

But is this prayer? No! I say. Prayer is more.

Prayer is a kaleidescope of colors and forms

Of wonder. Of togetherness. Of buttercups. And snow.

Prayer is Abraham saying, "Here I Am" to God.

Prayer is our saying" Here I am" to Life!

Prayer is our loud cries of frustration,

And the small voice of a child calling.

Prayer is Job's anguish cry of why!

And our anguished doubts.

Prayer is putting together the words written long ago:

Baruch ata adonai eloheynu melech ha-olam she-asani b-tzalmo

And one person's silence in one precious moment.

Prayer is questions, doubts, sorrows.

Prayer is laughter, dance, song.

Prayer is old and new.

Prayer is yes and no.

Prayer is a kaleidescope

I want to be a rabbi and kiss the stories of generations.

I want to lift up my prayers as a woman

In this great tradition,

In this Judaism I love.

A tallit. A prayer shawl.

Where did this come from, only men and boys wear the tallit!

What are you telling me? Does this belong to me?

Do I have the right to wear this? Is it mine? Is it mine?

Yes it belongs to you.

Yes, this tallit is yours.

Listen to your words. Listen to your heart.

Does it belong to me? Can I wear this prayer shawl?

Or am I breaking tradition?

Prayer is repeating the words written long ago:

Baruch ata adonai eloheynu melech ha-olam she-asani b-tzalmo

And one person's silence In one precious moment.

Prayer is questions, doubts, sorrows.

Prayer is laughter, dance, song.

Prayer is old and new.

Prayer is yes and no.

Prayer is a kaleidescope.

(Listen with your heart).

Prayer is our loud cries of frustration.

And the small voice of a child calling.

Prayer is Job's anguished cries of why!

And our anguished doubts.

Prayer is repeating the words written long ago.

The Rage Aria (Jamea)

After hearing the hate so many times, so many times,

You begin to believe it yourself. Believe it yourself.

And after hating yourself, so many times, so many times,

Life loses its colors, and your heart becomes blind

To any truth about love. To any truth about love.

Because no one is telling you, so many times, so many times,

That you deserve love. That you deserve love in your life.

And you look in the mirror. And you hate who you are.

And you learn to take risks. And you learn not to care.

What is love if it only offers silence?

What is love if it only offers silence?

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Come follow me through times magic turn.

Come follow me hear the lessons to be learned.

Jarena Lee Introduction (Cat/Sheba)

Let me introduce my friend Jarena Lee,

She was born in New Jersey in 1783.

To parents who were free from the tyranny of slaver,.

Yet, they were burdened financially.

So at age seven my friend Jarena Lee

Became a servant to a white family,

At seven, my friend Jarena Lee.

As she grew older, she worried about her soul's destiny.

*My friend Jarena Lee.
At age 21 she converted to Christianity.
We now join her at age 50
She is writing her autobiography.
My friend Jarena Lee.
So other souls my be freed
By her words of truth and destiny.*

Jarena Lee: A Fire In My Bones (Jarena, Cat, Elizabeth, James)

*Little girls were not made to be servants.
When I was hired out at age seven,
My heart grew hard against heaven.
Little girls were not made to be servants.*

*My heart grew cold and numb.
My heart grew numb and cold.
Yet, the spirit of the Lord never forsook my soul.*

*As the years progressed my anger increased.
Like many people I've heard, I turned this anger inward
And wished that my life would cease.*

*My heart grew cold and numb.
My heart grew numb and cold.
Yet, the spirit of the Lord never forsook my soul.*

*The spirit united the people of my church,
As we joined together to heal our hurts.
With my brothers and sisters at my side,
I leapt to my feet and cried,*

*O Lord, I said O Lord, I forgive every creature.
O Lord, I said O Lord, I want to be a preacher
O Lord, I said O Lord, I want to be a preacher*

*A voice in the silence said, "Go preach the Gospel."
My fear replied, "For a woman that's impossible."
I went to my pastor who confirmed my fears.
No women were allowed as preachers.*

*It was as a fire shut up in my bones.
It was as a fire shut up in my bones.
I knew that if I smothered the fire,
I would silence God's voice.
I would silence the breath of life,
And the good news for which I rejoiced.*

*So I began to breathe life into the fire.
I began to breathe life into the fire in my bones.*

*It was my passion to preach forgiveness.
It was my duty to speak the truth.
I began to breathe life into my bones.
I began to breathe life into my bones.*

*(Spoken) O, how careful we ought to be
Lest our by-laws of church discipline won't set us free,
No Lord, won't set us free!
Breathe life into the fire in your bones.
The truth will set you free into your souls divinity.
Breathe the life into the fire in your bones.
And know the source of your worth and dignity.*

*Please Don't Leave Now (James, Jimmy)
Please don't leave now, Uncle James.
- I may not have a choice.
I'd change all this if I could, oh I'd change this.
- I know you would.
Please keep living, Uncle James.
- I'll try my best.
I don't want this to end, Uncle James.
- I know, my friend.*

*Please keep breathing.
- It is the breath of life.
I don't want you to die.
- Or nor do I.*

*The thing that matters most
Is we're together now.
May the past and future bow.*

*Please keep loving, Uncle James.
- You teach me how my friend
And if you die.....
- The love won't end.*

*The thing that matters most
Is we're together here
We are friends forever
If we just allow.*

*The thing that matters most
Is we're together now.
May the past and future bow.*

Bodhi Cat Transition

*Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
Come follow me through times magic turn,
Come follow me hear the lessons to be learned.*

Olympia Brown Introduction (Olympia, Cat)

*Allow me to introduce my friend, Olympia Brown, the Reverend,
In 1863, her Universalist Ordination made her the first woman in this nation
To receive full, yes full ministerial standing in a denomination.*

*Olympia is a feisty, strong-willed old soul.
She named me after Susan B. Anthony, so I'm told.
In 1890 Olympia and Susan traveled by wagon
Over sun scorched Dakota plains and Wisconsin.
With others they campaigned for women's right to vote.
They were both stubborn, single-minded and bold.*

*Olympia loves to rise at the crack of dawn.
This morning we find her in her beloved garden,
This place where her soul does thrive.
The year is 1890, and Olympia is 55.*

Olympia Brown: Universal Love (Olympia, Cat, Elizabeth, Jimmy, James)

*Good morning, Anthony, you lazy old thing, lazy old thing
See over lake Michigan, the sun rising!
This day is ripe with things to see and do.
Let's dig up potatoes and beets for a hearty day stew.*

*Oh the beauty of each earthly potato and burgundy beet.
Surely God is here in this garden to meet. (repeat)*

*If one is to be heard while in the pulpit to preach,
She'd better be versed in language and speech.
At the end of seminary I made the choice
To spend a year training in speaking and voice.*

*A year I spent learning to breathe and form my words.
A year I spent learning to lower my voice so I can be heard.
I had to learn to lower my voice, lower my voice,
Lo, Lo, lower my voice so I could be heard.*

All good diction depends on careful articulation

Of every consonant sound (repeat)

*Theophalis thistle, the successful thistle sifter
While sifting a sieve full of unsifted thistles
Thrust three thousand thisles in the thick of this thumb
Through the thick of his thumb*

*Must learn to lower my voice,
Lo, Lo Lower my voice so I can be heard.
So God can be heard.*

*Today we are not dependent on any text or book.
With every breath that blows the spirit speaks to our souls.
The mountains and hills do preach, rocks and soils add testimony.
These voices of the world bring proof of divine love.
Divine love is also found in human deeds.
A thousand signs of depravity muted by one heroic act,
By which human nature is lifted to a higher station.
We shall speak the message of universal love. (repeat)*

*We are not alone because we have one another.
In relationship, we know a God which lives and loves forever.
Remember you are loved, and the gracious spirit welcomes you home.
Remember you are loved, and the kiss of a child welcomes you home.
Remember you are loved, and the whisper of the trees welcomes you home.
Remember you are loved when the hand of a friend welcomes you home.
Listen with your heart, Listen to your heart. (repeat)*

Live In Each Season (Elizabeth, Jimmy)

*Live in each season as it passes.
Breathe the air and
Taste the fruit.
Drink the drink
And resign yourself
To the influences of each.*

Bodhi Cat Transition

*Come follow me through times magic turn,
Come follow me hear the lessons to be learned.*

Chan Miew Yee Introduction (Cat)

*Please meet my friend Chan Miew Yee
Born in Hong Kong in 1903!
Early in life she became mother and wife,
But the depression and war brought suffering and strife.*

During the war she gave up her son.

*He was sent to safety in America's freedom,
While she remained in China to care for her elders.
But her heart knew the grief of missing a child.*

*She longed for a time simpler than sorrow,
So later in life she took Buddhist vows.
As a nun, she learned focus and meditation.
Chan Miew found peace in contemplation.*

*We join her now in her convent near Hong Kong.
She is old now and speaks her wisdom.
Listen now to the jewels she imparts
About mind and focus, religion and heart.*

Chan Miew Yee: Religion Is a Many-Colored Lantern (Chan, Cat)

*Religion is a many-colored lantern.
Religion is a many-colored lantern.
We all look through a different color.
But the light inside is the same.
The light inside is the same.*

*Buddhism begins with a man.
In India his message began.
So simple and wise was his truth,
People asked not, "who you are
But, what are you?"
"Are you a God?" they asked.
"No," said Buddha.
"Are you an Angel?" they asked.
"No", said Buddha.
"Are you a Saint?" they asked.
"No", said Buddha.
"Then what are you? Then what are you?"
"I am awake." "I am awake!"*

*Be mindful and listen to every breath you take.
Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
Open your mind to many truths and compassion.
Train your mind through focus and meditation.*

*Religion is a many-colored lantern.
Religion is a many-colored lantern.
We all look through a different color.
But the light inside is the same.
The light inside, the same.*

*Be mindful and listen to every breath you take, breath you take.
Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
Right concentration.
Help your mind to return to its true condition.
Let your heart speak in all your relations.*

Thoreau (James)

*As I love nature, as I love singing birds
And flowing rivers and morning and evening
And summer and winter and fall and spring,
So I love thee my friends, so I love thee.
And you reflect a ray of God to me.
And you reflect a ray of God to me.*

RABBI SANDY SASSO



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JARENA LEE

“Oh how careful we ought to be lest through our by-laws of church discipline we bring disrepute even to the word of life.”

OLYMPIA BROWN

“Today we are not dependent upon any text or letter of any book. It is the spirit which giveth life and the spirit speaks to our souls with every breath that blows. Thus earth and air are filled with divine love. ...[the evidence of divine love is also found in human deed] A thousand instances of depravity...are muted by the instance of one heroic action.”

CHAN MIEW YEE

The text for Chan Miew Yee is based upon Buddhist scripture and the quote from Mohammed Neguib, “Religion is a candle inside a multicolored lantern. Everyone looks through a particular color, but the candle remains the same.”

Acknowledgements

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