

New play on the origins of Memorial Day produced by Bedstuy Baptists

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By Pauline
Dolle

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Bedstuy Baptists honoring veterans by finding hopeful note in history

American flags are taped onto every pew in Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. Even in the humid summer heat, they hang stiffly as though standing at attention. A play rehearsal is going on around them but they are not moved by the ricocheting of voices and the bustling of bodies across the large sanctuary. Then, the heavy wooden doors to the church are slowly pulled open as someone enters the front hall.

A slight breeze runs over the flags and the pews. Immediately, the sanctuary is filled with the flutter of little polyester salutes. Being escorted down the central walkway to the front is a man in wheelchair. Though he is sitting, his long legs evidence that he once stood tall, and his eyes still look above most men's heads as he gazes around the room.

As the first audience members begin to trickle into their seats, the cast, also as though blown, disappear to the back rooms of the church for last-minute preparations before they take the stage. It is almost time for the play to start.



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This weekend on Friday night and Saturday afternoon, [Mount Pisgah Baptist Church at 212 Tompkins Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant](#), Brooklyn invited veterans and civilians in New York City to observe Memorial Day by returning all the way back to the beginnings of the holiday. The church offers this history lesson in the form of Honorable Distinction, an original play written by playwright and congregation member Kenya A. Cagle. Michele Hawkins Jones is the director and Jamel Gaines, the choreographer. By exploring this history, the church hopes to encourage current veterans that their labors also will be remembered by future generations. Mount Pisgah also wants to teach their young people that current struggles will be solved just as previous struggles were.

“Healing is the hallmark word of our ministry, and healing means wholeness, and wholeness for us is a marriage between our hope and our history -- that is why we do what we do,” says executive pastor, Reverend Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood.



Reverend Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood. Photo: A Journey through NYC religions

The play depicts the formation of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, one of the first African-American units in the United States. In the heat of the Civil War, both born freemen and those who were emancipated from former slavery wanted to support the Union against the Confederate army.

After the war was ended, over 250 bodies, including African American soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts, were found dumped unceremoniously into a mass grave outside of Charleston, South Carolina. Outraged, African Americans dug up the bodies of these beloved heroes and prepared them in proper burials. Friends and families placed flowers and fencing around this new cemetery. On the day that they had decided to dedicate the plot to the Union's lost soldiers, a parade of over 3,000 young African American children and the remaining officers of the 54th Massachusetts covered the grounds. Here, the first Memorial Day was celebrated. The next year, the day was made an official holiday.

Members of the church produced, wrote, and choreographed the play in one month's time. As the play finishes,

Youngblood takes the stage and asks veterans to give feedback.

Solomon Quick, 71, who served in a special force unit in the Korean war, describes the performance as direct and emotional, and he praises the “proficiency of Kenya Cagle and the actors and the actresses.” He is glad that “[the actors] painted a picture that was presentable, to make [being a veteran] socially acceptable. You don’t want to get into the degradation and the horrors of it, because then nobody wants to hear that part--take my word for this, nobody appreciates the warrior until the barbarians is at the gate.” He thinks that the public’s distaste for the horror of war exacerbates problems that veteran administrations face, because nobody wants to get involved to fix them.

Harold Hedgpath, 67, from the 9th infantry division of the United States Army, believes the educational aspect of the show raised awareness to the original purpose of Memorial Day. He says he will exit the church “elated” and “with honor,” assured that his efforts in the army will not be forgotten.

Another veteran, Ruben R. Pratts, 67, of the United States Marines, who had served in the Vietnam War, appreciated that the show honored fallen men from both the Confederate and Yankee sides of the Civil War. He hopes that the civilian population will remember, “hey, we exist, we live free, and these United States exist [because] we are responsible for maintaining the United States. Not congress, not the president, not the governor, no politician. The defending warriors of the nation.”



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One church member, Bob Henry, 83, believes that the story of the 54th Massachusetts needs to be told because it is “fading in the minds of many people.” However, he looks forward to seeing it made explicitly relevant to a younger generation.

Youngblood emphasizes that it's important to hear feedback from the veterans who attend so that next year's production can be improved and made more accurate. Indeed, many of the veterans are already looking forward to seeing what more the church can produce.

"I would look forward to every other time there is a Memorial Day, or maybe even this house of worship setting up sessions to make the people aware until Memorial Day," suggests Quick. "Don't just make it on Memorial Day. Maybe, once a month or once every two weeks. Bring attention to the people, to the part that we played in all this."

Video by Pauline Dolle, story by Sadie Cruz. Additional coverage by Tony Carnes and Moné Skratt-Henry.

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