

# We Shall Not Be Moved

A hybrid opera in three acts

Music by Daniel Bernard Roumain • Words by Marc Bamuthi Joseph  
Directed by Bill T. Jones

## Study Guide to the Opera



The opera *We Shall Not Be Moved* revisits the story of the 1985 bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia, and that tragedy's impact on Philadelphia's youth. Shown here: Actors portraying the ghosts that inhabit the site of the bombing surround character Un/Sung (Lauren Whitehead, center). *Dave DiRentis /Opera Philadelphia*

## Do you remember the MOVE bombing?

**Who:** MOVE members harbored inside a row house

**Where:** 6221 Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia

**When:** May 13, 1985 in the evening

**What:** Police helicopter drops two bombs onto the roof of the MOVE compound. The fire burns for nearly an hour, killing 11 people and destroying 62 homes. Fire equipment was in place but the Police Commissioner told the Fire Commissioner to "Let the fire burn."

Though the event happened decades ago, some Philadelphians remember the MOVE bombing vividly and experience a collective trauma. Librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph and his collaborators—composer Daniel Bernard Roumain and director/choreographer Bill T. Jones—tread carefully to create *We Shall Not Be Moved*, an opera that takes its name from the old spiritual-turned-civil-rights anthem and the Philadelphia black liberation group, MOVE.

What led to such a tragic event? MOVE was a communal organization founded in 1972, abiding by philosophies of anarcho-primitivism. Its ideology became increasingly revolutionary. In 1978, a standoff with Philadelphia Police resulted in the death of one police officer and injuries to other officers, firefighters, and MOVE members. In 1985, another fire happened and a police helicopter dropped two bombs onto the roof of the MOVE compound. The police bombing was strongly condemned, and ensuing civil suits against the City of Philadelphia and the police resulted in millions of dollars in damages awarded to MOVE survivors and other residents.

**Why?** Perhaps school closings and kids whose families and communities have failed them? Is this a decades-old story or a current event?

*We Shall Not Be Moved*, commissioned by Opera Philadelphia, was named one of 2017's "Best Classical Music Performances" by *The New York Times*.

For more information:

[WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED: Student Guide - Opera Philadelphia](#)

## *We Shall Not Be Moved* Synopsis

**ACT I** On the run after a series of tragic incidents, five North Philly teens (John Henry, John Blue, John Little, John Mack, and Un/Sung) find refuge in an abandoned, condemned house in West Philadelphia. The home sits at the exact location of the headquarters of the MOVE organization before it was infamously burned to the ground in a 1985 police confrontation that left 11 people dead and no government officials indicted or meaningfully reprimanded. The teens are assuaged and even inspired by the ghosts who inhabit this home (who we refer to as the OGs), and begin to see their squatting in the home as a matter of destiny and resistance rather than urgent fear or precarious circumstance. Into this mix enters Glenda, a north Philly native turned West Philly cop who patrols this quiet stretch of Osage Avenue on her regular beat. Glenda observes that the young people have taken over the home and are “hanging out” there when they are supposed to be in school. She moves determinedly to sweep the kids out of the home, threatening them with arrest and ridiculing their intentions. But in a chaotic accident, she moves too far and mistakenly discharges her firearm, injuring one of the teens. In her temporary shock, Glenda is overrun by the other young people, who turn the tables on the situation by pointing Glenda’s own gun at her and subsequently handcuffing her to a chair in the center of the house.

**ACT II** John Henry lays bleeding in a pool of sorrow, confronted at a desperately young age with his own mortality. All parties are now frightened, disoriented, and vulnerable, and the only sense of empowerment in this bleak moment comes from the OGs who infuse the home with a spirituality that is palpably felt by the young people in particular. Glenda challenges the validity of this ‘movement of holy ghosts,’ but cannot deny that whatever the origins, the young people, led by the sole female-identified teen, Un/Sung, are clearly operating from a place of conviction. Still suspicious and driven by her vulnerable position, Glenda probes this conviction, intimating that the teens are not motivated by principle alone. Finally the teens succumb to the reality of the moment: their brother has been wounded and is in need of help, and the most expedient way to help him is to leave the house. They decide to reveal to Glenda the circumstances that drove them to squat in the house on Osage. They think Glenda has something to hide (firing at an unarmed teen) and so do they, and if they come clean with their story, the combination of transparency and quid pro quo may grant them safe, unreported passage out of the house. However, in revealing the origins of their plight, they also realize that a young man who John Blue has killed is Glenda’s own brother, Manny.

**ACT III** The family confers feverishly about the increasingly limited options for their next move, concluding that the best “survival” tactic is to “disappear” Glenda altogether. Un/Sung commits to completing the task, instructing her brothers to leave quickly for a predetermined location to avoid any further witnesses while she does “something awful.” A confrontation between the young girl and Glenda ensues, concluding with silence, complete darkness in the theater, and the assumption of injury. When the lights come all the way up, the family has vanished, and the house on Osage Avenue has burned to the ground. Glenda tells an interviewer the story of her waning moments with the family from a plane above the action, but we watch a different story unfolding at eye level. All the players are setting the house on “fire,” not with kerosene or grand flames, but with small, glass-framed candles. The image is not of arson, but of ritual. The Family is turning the home into an altar, perhaps an instrument of forgiving, of letting go, of release, and of renewal. As the lights come down for the final time, the last remaining image on stage is of the skeleton of a house, lit up like a shrine, while the OGs move around it in holy rites.

Source: *We Shall Not Be Moved* score, © 2017 DredLin Music Publishing

## The Players

**OGs** — spirits and thus can both move fiercely and sing like angels. The ones in the stained glass of the black church. They undoubtedly have memories of what happened here, but they \*remember\* much more than one historical time or place and express themselves as such. Their job is to teach those histories through movement and conjuring. They are the faculty of 62<sup>nd</sup> and Osage University.

### **UN/SUNG, spoken word artist** — 15 yrs.

The Tubman of this railroad. The one who misses mom and dad the most. Expresses primarily through spoken speech.

### **GLENDA, mezzo-soprano** — 35 yrs.

An officer from the North, working in the West. A “not a patriot, not a saint but still” genuinely good person, who may or may not be playing on the right side.

### **JOHN BLUE, countertenor** — 16 yrs.

a trans boy who expresses in falsetto and upper register. The brother most likely to steal your shit and cut you for good measure.

### **JOHN LITTLE, tenor** — 17 yrs.

named for the label that Malcolm refused. The thrown away fruit that became the seed that fed the next . . .

### **JOHN MACK, baritone** — 18 yrs.

A jazzman armed with a secret stash of quotes from old bluegrass records. The preacher.

**JOHN HENRY, bass-baritone** — 17 yrs. would rather lift you physically than lift his voice. A BBoy.

## COMPOSER

### Daniel Bernard Roumain

Composer, Violinist, Artist Entrepreneur



[DBR \(danielroumain.com\)](http://danielroumain.com)

[Roumain, Daniel Bernard | Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/contemporary-artists/daniel-bernard-roumain)

Daniel Bernard Roumain (known by his initials, DBR) is a prolific and endlessly collaborative classically-trained composer, performer, educator, violinist, activist, record company executive, and band-leader, whose work combines classical music with jazz, hip-hop, electronica, and rock.

DBR's acclaimed work as a composer and performer spans more than two decades, and has been commissioned by venerable artists and institutions worldwide. He has been credited with helping to redefine the form and broaden the scope of classical music, giving it a fresh relevance, especially among young people. He writes for orchestra, chamber orchestra, string quartet, solo instrument, voice, and rock band. The compositions match DBR's main instrument, the violin, with a variety of ambient and electronic sounds, such as spoken dialogue and sampled beats. "About as omnivorous as a contemporary artist gets" (*The New York Times*), DBR is perhaps the only composer whose collaborations traverse the worlds of Philip Glass, Bill T. Jones, Savion Glover, and Lady Gaga. DBR has appeared on NPR, American Idol, and ESPN.

DBR plays approximately twenty instruments, including violin, piano, guitar, bass, viola, and drums, and also does occasional vocals. His commitment to arts education has garnered long-term relationships with countless universities, orchestras, and performing arts centers.

## LIBRETTIST

### Marc Bamuthi Joseph

Librettist, Spoken Word Artist, Educator



[Marc Bamuthi Joseph - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Bamuthi_Joseph)

[Marc Bamuthi Joseph | Kennedy Center \(kennedy-center.org\)](https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/marc-bamuthi-joseph/)

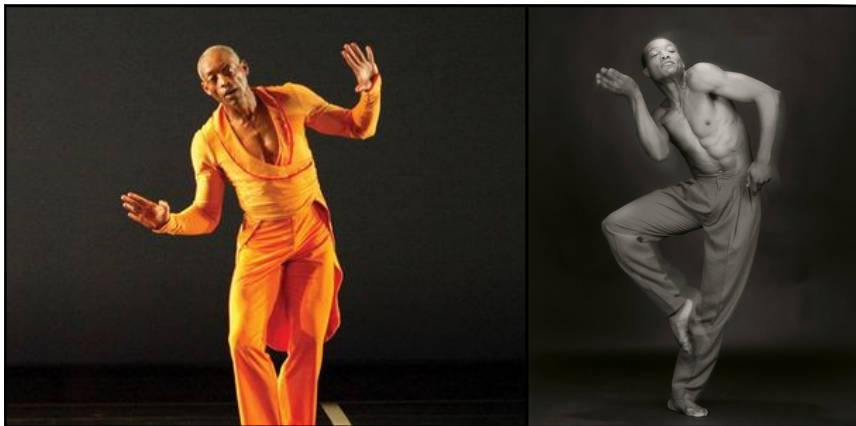
Marc Bamuthi Joseph is a spoken-word poet, dancer, playwright, and actor who frequently directs stand-alone hip-hop theater plays. His bold poetically-driven work investigates social issues and cultural identity. He is a steadfast believer in empathy as the most valuable currency in building community, and seeks to spark curiosity and dialogue about freedom, compassion, and fearlessness through pioneering arts stewardship and education.

A 2017 TEDGlobal Fellow, Bamuthi graced the cover of *Smithsonian Magazine* as one of America's Top Young Innovators in the Arts and Sciences, artistically directed HBO's "Russell Simmons presents Brave New Voices," and is an inaugural recipient of the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship, which annually recognizes 50 of the country's greatest living artists. *Dance Magazine* named him a Top Influencer in 2017. Bamuthi has won numerous grants, including from the National Endowment for the Arts and Creative Capital Foundation.

In 2019, Joseph became the Vice President and Artistic Director of Social Impact at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The Center commissioned him to write his play, */peh-LO-tah/*, which was inspired by soccer and Bamuthi's first generation American experience, intersecting global economics, cross border fan culture, and the politics of joy. Born to Haitian immigrant parents, Joseph drew up in Queens, New York City.

## DIRECTOR-CHOREOGRAPHER-DRAMATURG

**Bill T. Jones**



[Bill T. Jones - Students | Britannica Kids | Homework Help](#)

[Portrait of a Nation Prize Recipient: Bill T. Jones | National Portrait Gallery \(si.edu\)](#)

*A stage director is responsible for creating the vision around a theatrical work. This vision aims to serve the work already set forth by the composer and the librettist, and to realize their vision by facilitating strong collaboration and optimizing talents from all of the players involved.*

Director-choreographer Bill T. Jones comes from a generation of makers. These are artists who hunger for the opportunity to create, invent, build, and produce. Bill T. Jones began his career in the early 1970s as a maker in the world of movement and dance. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional aesthetics of dance had been built up by choreographers like Martha Graham, José Arcadio Limón, and Doris Humphrey. Each welcomed comparisons to the Ancient Greeks, relishing in dance's ability to be a ritual of storytelling and moral values. Bill T. Jones was at the forefront of a strand of makers who wanted to defeat such traditions. They sought to overcome the need for meaning in movements. They desired to cloud one's ability to identify character, theme, and climax. Why couldn't dance be celebrated if it remained devoid of these structures? Couldn't dance just be a man moving around on a stage with a cup? Isn't there still beauty in dance where an ensemble can explore the realm of movements one is able to achieve without even standing on two feet? This body of thought led Bill T. Jones to co-create New York Live Arts with Arnie Zane; the company is now celebrated as the destination for innovative movement-based artistry.

Realizing that Opera Philadelphia has the largest new works practice in the world, Bill T. Jones added his voice and leadership to creating the vision of *We Shall Not Be Moved*. Jones welcomed the opportunity to work on an opera that carries the potential to communicate to a wide audience and to learn more himself about hip-hop and pop cultures.

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#### ***We Shall Not Be Moved* unique facts**

**OG:** "original gangster," a term used in early rap music to describe someone viewed as tough in behavior and demeanor. In modern times, it means an older person who has had to "tough out" a difficult past and has now earned this title as a sign of respect.

**Instrumentation:** Pre-recorded Voice, Violin, Viola, Cello, Bass/Electric Bass, Percussion, Drum Set, Piano

#### **For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:**

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