

THE CONTRIBUTOR



Photo of Saam Psalms provided by Rejoice School of Ballet.

POINTE THE WAY

Through imaginative choreography, young dancers tell the story of black history in America.

You've seen them before: images of human barriers, locked arms, hands raised in the air as if to say 'Don't shoot.' Those powerful pictures, along with the ones of snarling dogs, riot gear and hoses spraying the backs of black men, were projected on a screen at the Fourth Story Theatre in the West End United Methodist Church. African drum songs filled the air, followed by gospel hymns and spiritual work songs. This was *Saam Psalms: Together Songs*, an original ballet performance by the Rejoice School of Ballet.

Aimed at exploring the complicated history of slavery and racism, the performance was done by 24 pre-professional dancers ages 8-17 years old. Produced and created by Gerald Watson, Rejoice faculty member and dancer at the Nashville Ballet, in concert with Rejoice founder and executive director Patricia Cross, its purpose was to create space for a conversation about a difficult history.

According to Watson, it was also to equip the young dancers with a deeper understanding of how the past relates to the present.

Founded by Cross in 2000, Rejoice exists to provide dance instruction to students from diverse racial, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds — 78 percent of Rejoice dancers are from low-income families.

Through dance, *Saam Psalms*, which featured three acts — Resilience, Resistance and Restoration — tells the stories of Africans taken from their homeland, passaged to American, taken into slavery and living as property. The final act, Restoration, highlights the many accomplishments of African Americans, including Ruby Bridges, George Washington Carver, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and

others.

"As I read memoirs or notes from way back, from slaves or from the civil rights movement, I couldn't believe how much those stories have in common with what's going on today," Watson says. "That is enough to motivate me to educate those around me. We talk about these young students, and we keep saying we need to change the culture. But how are we going to do that if younger generations aren't educated and no one tells them what's going on in the world?"

The performance was based on stories studied by dancers and books donated by the Village Chapel, including *Freedom in the Congo* by Carole Boston Weatherford and R. Gregory Christie, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles and George Ford, and *No More! Stories and Songs of Slave Resistance* by Doreen Rappaport and Shane W. Evans.

Watson, who earned his degree in contemporary dance from Boston Conservatory, had a hand in every piece of the February performance, which began rehearsals in October 2017. He acted as choreographer, designed the costumes with the Nashville Ballet costume shop and produced the show. He even built the floor on which the dancers performed.

"A lot went into the logistics, so the choreography was the fun part," he says. "I really love history, and I always have, but as I looked at my own heritage, I see this wall where I can only go back so far. That wall is something that's always intrigued me."

Alade McClendon began dancing at 4 years old, following her older sister Remi's pirouettes and grand jetés. She's been dancing with Rejoice for eight years and says *Saam Psalms*

was the most emotionally involved show she's ever done — not only because of its subject matter, but because of what it forced her to face as she dove through the history books.

"We always do stories about princesses and fairy tales, and all you really have to think about with those is scared, surprised, excited," McClendon says. "We've never had to think of portraying someone being forced into a life of work and pain. It means a lot [to get to tell this story] knowing that my ancestors went through this, knowing that it could have been me if I was only born a couple centuries earlier," she says.

McClendon portrayed a young slave torn from her family, with her sister Remi playing the role of sibling in the show as well.

"I had to channel what it would feel like if I was taken away from my sister in real life. I felt like I almost cried. It was so powerful," she says. "We'd talked about the history in school but never about the emotional hardships. Today, I am a spoiled child who has a phone and goes to a nice dance company, but I could have been a child who, from the day I was born, was destined for a life of slavery, never escaping. I could have been taken away from my sister like that. Channeling those gut-wrenching emotions that so many people felt was hard."

To prepare for the show, the dancers participated in group discussions and pored over history books. They weren't just dancing or following choreography, they were following the heart of Rejoice's mission and learning.

"We were learning about the history of what we were portraying. We were learning about what they went through," says Liza Bandy, who

has been with Rejoice for almost nine years. "We've had some classes on it, and I've learned about it in school, but here, we really went into it and took the time to understand it. It helped us tell the story better."

For Watson, one of the toughest pieces was explaining to the dancers that just 60 or so years ago, it would have been nearly impossible for them to sit by, talk to or even make eye contact with friends of another race -- the same friends whose shoulders their arms were draped around. But it was those conversations that eventually shaped the dance and helped the girls understand the story they were telling.

"The girls really informed me as to how we were going to tell this story, not by what would be easy or what other people had done, but by what was going to be pertinent to this story and important to them," Watson says.

"But this ballet is about so much more than just the steps. It's about the story and the history, and these girls have become masterful storytellers. I give them the choreography, but they have the freedom to make those personal choices on stage. That's something you can foster but you can't teach. I'm so proud of them for figuring that out for themselves."

Rejoice School of Ballet offers dance instruction to roughly 150 students a year on an income-based sliding scale. More than 75 percent of the dancers receive financial assistance for classes, dancewear, costumes and performances. Saam Psalms: Together Songs was dedicated in memory of Rejoice School of Ballet graduate Janesia Young, who was shot and killed in Madison in Aug. 2017.