

Amelia Boynton's play 'Through the Years' performed in Chicago

by Marianna Wertz

On Sunday, Feb. 13, the Schiller Institute in Chicago staged a history-making performance, as part of Black History Month, of the 1936 musical drama *Through the Years* at the Du Sable Museum Theatre. The play was written by civil rights veteran Amelia Boynton Robinson, who today is the vice chairman of the Schiller Institute. *Through the Years* is a dramatic rendition of the birth of the African-American spiritual, told through the life of a slave, with more than a dozen spirituals sung throughout the play.

Mrs. Robinson conceived the play as a means to uplift the dignity and courage of those with whom she worked as a Department of Agriculture extension agent in rural Alabama in the 1930s, and to raise money to support the building of a community center for blacks in then racially segregated Selma, Alabama. *Through the Years* tells the story of Joshua Terrell, who, despite the harsh conditions of a slave's life, fights with courage and determination to win freedom and gain leadership in the U.S. Congress.

The Chicago performance was the brainchild of Mrs. Sheila Anne Jones, Schiller Institute board member and a leading candidate for governor of Illinois in the March 15 Democratic primary. Mrs. Jones, a longtime associate of Lyndon LaRouche, is the first African-American woman to run for governor of Illinois. She is also a former public school music teacher, and conceived the performance of the play as a means to convey the importance of "saving the children of America." This play, she said, "is just the beginning. We mean to complete the work Mr. LaRouche started before he went to jail. All children must and will sing! This is how to stop domestic violence."

Physical conditions no limit

The way in which the musical drama was cast, rehearsed, and staged is as important as the performance itself. The initial concept was to use the play to begin building a Chicago-wide community chorus. Coaching in *bel canto* (beautiful singing) method and rehearsals of the script began about a month before the performance on Chicago's South Side, in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago's black ghetto, under Mrs. Jones's direction. As she described the process: "Participants are mothers from homeless shelters and their babies, as young as three years old; former or potential gang youth;

single parents; and teenagers from various community organizations. All who have been braving the Siberian weather and icy streets to sojourn to these rehearsals have expressed their joy in many different ways at this project.

"Imagine a scene like the following," she said. "A flat in the poorest neighborhood of the city of Chicago, where the pipes have burst. No heat. Virtually no infrastructure, virtually no lights. Huddled under blankets, with one little space heater in the middle, are 10 little children, from 5 years up to 18 years old reading Amelia's play aloud, and shaping their little mouths as they learn how to round their tones to sing *bel canto*, with their attention so concentrated, that the cold and the broken-down physical conditions are of no consequence. This was the site and condition of one of the earliest rehearsals for the play.

"The dream of this play started with this small wonderful group. These little pearls gave me hope, and this little army became the initial recruiters from the neighborhoods of the city. This work was then cross-fired to the church networks and those who ought to be supporting this effort."

'Give hope and beauty to future generations'

The playwright, Amelia Boynton Robinson, who at 82 years old is today widely recognized as one of America's leading civil rights figures, traveled to Chicago to witness the performance and encourage the participants. She commented on the importance of the play for today's audiences: "Music cannot be separated from the struggle of the Americans in the civil rights movement, because it is a struggle for the inalienable rights of all men. We recently saw this force of love in November of 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Often it was music which carried the day against munitions. In Leipzig, it was the Leipzig Orchestra and its conductor who helped to stop the secret police from massacring demonstrators. . . .

"This play was written to give the necessary hope and beauty to future generations. I believe that because Dr. King was killed, many people cast aside this powerful weapon. Fear, rage, and hate took hold of our children's souls. Therefore," she concluded, "my dream for the performance of *Through the Years* in Chicago during Black History Month, is to inspire a new movement which empowers our children with love and respect for themselves and others."



In the last scene of Through the Years, four generations of Joshua Terrell's family gather around his deathbed singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

'My Ma is dead'

People began arriving at the auditorium on Chicago's South Side as early as 4 p.m. for a 5 o'clock performance. The excitement was tangible, at the unique new opportunity the play provided for the participants.

The evening opened with a written greeting from Schiller Institute Chairman Helga Zepp-LaRouche, to her "adopted mother" Amelia Robinson. Sheila Jones presented the greeting together, with a rendition of the African-American spiritual "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Following this came the recitation of a poem written by James Weldon Johnson titled "Fifty Years," recited by cast member Beverly Eldridge. Then nationally known composer and singer Charles Bevel performed one of his most powerful compositions, "What Really Bothers Me, Is Not Many People Really Want To Be Free!"

The stage was then transformed, twig by twig, into a cotton field, all handmade by the cast and Schiller Institute volunteers. Then, as the lights came up, onto the stage wandered 20 small black children, dressed in white muslin slave garb, girls with their heads wrapped, and boys with pant legs rolled up, each with muslin-cloth sacks tied to their waists. They began singing, "Cotton needs a pickin' so bad, cotton needs a pickin' so bad. . . ." This was the first of more than a dozen spirituals around which the play is constructed.

The lead character, Joshua, who begins the play as the small child of the slave Mandy, and ends it as a U.S. Con-

gressman, was played by Anthony Harper, the LaRouche Democrat who is running for the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor in the March 15 primary. The scene in which he discovers that his mother has been murdered by the cotton bosses was powerfully done, as he kneels down over his dying mother, crying out, "My ma is dead, dead, dead!" He lifts her up, in total anguish, as the children close around him, singing, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile!"

Transforming, uplifting politics in Chicago

The month-long activities leading up to the Feb. 13 performance of *Through the Years* have had the effect of transforming politics in Chicago. By focusing their efforts on uplifting the minds of Chicago's citizens above the pettiness of politics as usual, the Schiller Institute has succeeded in changing the nature of the debate. This became clear in a unique event on Feb. 12, the day before the performance, when Amelia Robinson was royally honored before an audience of over 1,000 people at the Regal Theatre, on Chicago's South Side, by the London-based acting troupe presenting a performance of *Black Heroes in the Hall of Fame*. Mrs. Robinson was inducted into the Hall of Fame in the ceremony, while Mrs. Jones was honored as the first black woman to seek the position of governor of Illinois.

The Schiller Institute now plans to repeat *Through the Years* in other American cities, and to continue the process of "saving the children" through the kind of cultural efforts that were demonstrated so successfully in this performance.