

The Republican.

'Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story' opera about civil rights activist to be performed at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley

By Cori Urban | Special to The Republican

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Berkeley, California-based WomenArts (formerly based in Northampton, MA) is collaborating with the Mount Holyoke Symphony Orchestra to present the East Coast premiere of an opera about the 1960s civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer.



1Philip Lima, left, as "Pap" Hamer and Andrea Chinedu Nwoke as Fannie Lou Hamer rehearsing for "Dark River, The Fannie Lou Hamer Story" (Photo: Michael S. Gordon/The Republican)

"Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story," a full-length opera by Mary D. Watkins, will be performed on Friday, April 4, at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday, April 5, at 3 p.m. in Chapin Auditorium on the Mount Holyoke campus.

Hamer was one of the first African-Americans to register to vote in Mississippi in the 1960s, and she was one of the leaders in the struggle to obtain voting rights for African-Americans and to integrate the Democratic Party in the South.

"The opera is very timely since the voting rights that Fannie Lou Hamer and so many others fought for 50 years ago are under attack once again," said WomenArts Executive Director Martha Richards. "Over the summer the Supreme Court removed the enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and several states are trying to turn back the clock with restrictive voting regulations."

The voting rights that Hamer and others fought and died for in the 1960s are in jeopardy once again, she said, adding that the younger generation needs to know about this chapter of American history.

“Also, this opera captures the particular challenges faced by women activists; Fannie Lou Hamer had to fight against sexism as well as racism throughout her life. The opera explores (her) decision to fight for her rights, her challenges, her triumphs and the impact of her activism on her husband and children,” she said.

Richards was inspired to do the opera in Western Massachusetts partly because of the success of an opera about Sojourner Truth, Paula Kimper’s “Truth,” at the Academy of Music in Northampton in 2012.

“That production was an amazing reflection of the history and community of Northampton,” Richards said. “When I stood and cheered at the end of the opera, I was cheering in part for that long and proud tradition of activism.”

“So many incredible social activists have lived and worked in the Pioneer Valley, and their ideals of justice and equality still inform the life of the community,” she added. “I think that ‘Dark River’ will resonate with audiences because it affirms those values through the story of an inspiring grassroots leader who was willing to sacrifice everything to obtain voting rights for her people.”

She said it is rare to see productions of operas by women composers. “The New York Metropolitan Opera has only done one opera by a woman in its entire 129-year history; that one was in 1903. Operas by women of color like Mary Watkins are even harder to find on stage.”

Richards saw the original production of “Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story” in Oakland, Calif., in 2009 and wanted to bring it to larger audiences.

She introduced herself to Watkins, and about a year later, WomenArts got a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation to explore ways to build partnerships between



Thandiwe Delgado-Kinyatti, left, as young Fannie Lou Hamer and Synthia Pullman as her mother, in rehearsal for “Dark River.” (Photo: Michael S. Gordon/The Republican)

progressive women artists and women's organizations. "We picked Mary's opera as one of our model projects. Our goal was to build a successful partnership between Mary and a substantial women's organization--in this case Mount Holyoke," Richards said.

Auditions for "Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story" took place in New York and Boston; 14 professional singers are in residence in South Hadley from March 17 – April 5 for rehearsals and performances. They will be performing with the 42-piece Mount Holyoke Orchestra conducted by Ng Tian Hui.

"I really love the music that Mary D. Watkins has written. It is a great meld of contemporary classical, gospel, Motown, funk and '90s ballad," Ng said. "Andrea Chinede Nwoke in particular is just such a perfect Fannie Lou Hamer, and her solo arias I think are literally going to bring the house down!"

He is careful to ensure that the music program resonates with larger issues that are in the public's consciousness, so that the music is in contact with the concerns of audiences. "Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story" in the year of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Bill of Civil Rights "just felt like a perfect fit for Mount Holyoke College," he said. "Our students have always had a deep interest in these social issues. The relatively unsung heroine of the movement has a story that deserves to be heard by a wider audience, and celebrating the achievements of extraordinary women like Fannie Lou Hamer aligns well with our mission as a women's college."

Visit www.darkriveropera.org for more information about the opera.

IF YOU GO

Event: "Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story"

When: Friday, April 4, at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday, April 5, at 3 p.m.

Where: Mount Holyoke College's Chapin Auditorium, South Hadley

Cost: \$20 for the front section; \$15 general admission; and \$10 students and seniors.

For more info: Call (800) 838-3006 or online at www.DarkRiverOpera.org