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Opera *Dark River* Honors Struggle For Civil Rights



Plantation boss (Matt Chastain) threatens 'Pap' Hamer (Philip Lima) and Fannie Lou (Andrea Chinedu Nwoke) in 'Dark River.'
Mt. Holyoke College, April 4-5. (Rehearsal photos by Michael S. Gordon-The Republican.)

By Marvin J. Ward

SOUTH HADLEY, Mass. — It was 50 years ago that [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), speaking symbolically for African Americans still struggling for equality in American life and a voice in government, uttered her famous expression of despair and defiance at the 1964 Democratic National Convention: “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.”



Fannie Lou Hamer addresses the '64 DNC: “Sick and tired.” (AP-APR)

Hamer’s role in the civil rights movement is memorialized in [Mary D. Watkins’](#) 2009 opera *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story*, offered in an admirable production at [Mt. Holyoke College](#) that brought together a mixed musical force of professionals, amateurs and students under the baton of faculty conductor [Ng Tian Hui](#).

The daughter of sharecroppers with only a sixth grade education, Hamer (1917-77) became a leader in the [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee](#) and the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](#). Watkins' opera focuses on Hamer's early influences, how she came to be involved in civil rights, her work in the movement, and its stress on her personal life.

Fashioned in two acts with 22 scenes, *Dark River* is infused with elements of jazz, blues and gospel music. Impressive in leading assignments as Fannie Lou Hamer and her husband Perry "Pap" Hamer were [Andrea Chinedu Nwoke](#) and [Philip Lima](#). In support, sixteen singers rotated in and out of ensemble and solo roles.



Little Fannie (Thandiwe Delgado-Kinyatti), mother (Synthia Pullman).

The story follows Fannie's life, told largely through flashbacks, from early childhood to the year before her death in 1977. Born on a white-owned plantation in the Mississippi delta, Hamer began by questioning as a child why she could not go to school like the white girls. Yet after learning of the murder of [Emmett Till](#), Hamer's sense of justice propelled her into the 1960s fight by African Americans to gain equal access to the vote through voter registration.

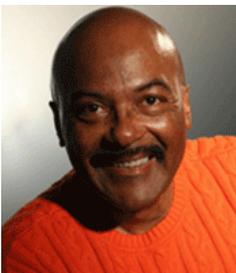
She suffered many of the physical retributions that others did: beatings by police, forced sterilization, attacks on and destruction of her property when she and her husband managed to acquire their own farm, and the death of her daughter as the result of refusal of medical care by a white local hospital.



Composer Mary D. Watkins

Hamer was a determined and dogged individual who deserves a greater place in the American consciousness than she currently enjoys, and Watkins' belief in this inspired her to write and compose this work, which had a six-concert premiere in Oakland in 2009. That was a small-scale production, with an orchestral ensemble of six musicians, so the Mt. Holyoke venture represented a step up and a move forward, perhaps toward a future well-deserved full-scale opera-house presentation.

The score is not so impressive for anything resembling soaring arias as it is for attractive passages that reinforce interpersonal relationships – for example, between Fannie and Pap and between Fannie and the wife of the sheriff who arrested her. Fannie's song "Is This America," part of her speech to the Atlantic City convention, provided an effective translation of the spoken word into music. Similarly, a duet as telephone conversation between Fannie and Pap dramatically pointed up personal and political tensions.



Director Darryl V. Jones

This production, directed by [Darryl V. Jones](#), who also directed the 2009 premiere, was very creative in dealing with the limitations imposed by the venue, a multi-purpose hall that can also serve as a ballroom, with a small stage that cannot accommodate drops, flies, or sets.

The orchestra was placed at the back of the stage, with two rows of three chairs each, all wooden, but apparently deliberately not matching, on each side that served for the singers when they were not the main focus of attention, and who executed costume modifications while seated while others sang and acted in front of them.



Fannie's civil rights commitment draws 'Pap' into the struggle.

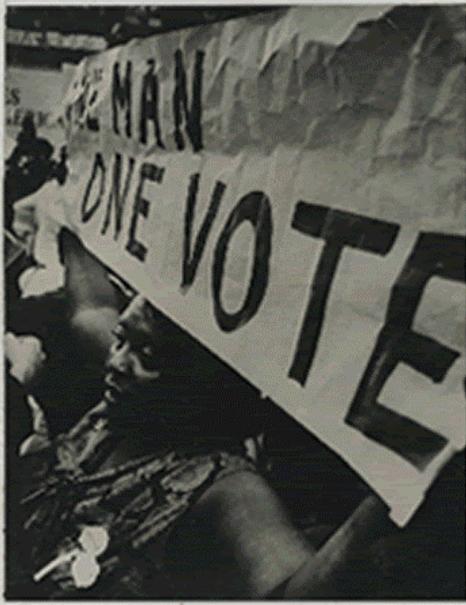
Some of that singing and acting occurred on riser platforms and steps placed on both sides in front of the stage, with some performers walking out into the aisles in one instance, and some having entered the stage via the aisles at the work's opening as well. This was one of the methods used to bring the audience into the action as participants rather than mere observers.

To compensate for the inability to have drops, flies, and sets for the sixteen separate scenes of Act I and the nine of Act II, appropriate black and white period photographs, some of those in Act II featuring Hamer herself, were projected onto a screen above stage center, with text slides indicating the location and year of the action portrayed separating them.



Hamer is beaten in jail, but sheriff's wife (Mauri Tetreault) offers help.

This made it easy for the audience to follow the frequent 30- or 40-year time differences and made the work progress in the way a film about the subject might present it to a cinema audience. As someone who was alive when the events occurred, and aware of them as they unfolded (though I did not see Hamer's momentous speech), I found this compelling and convincing. An acquaintance seated in the row behind me said at intermission that she would have appreciated supertitles to aid in the understanding of the text, but I personally found the diction to be for the most part excellent.



Hamer at the '64 DNC. (Fred DeVan, Tougaloo College Civil Rts. Coll.)

Perhaps because of Act I's frequent switching of setting and focus, some members of the audience left at intermission, but they missed the more compact and tighter Act II that led to the climax of the chant-song "Freedom Now," transforming into "Yes We Can" and making the connection between the half-century-old events to those of our own time.

Watkins' work was riveting, and handled very well the constant shifts between the details of Hamer's personal life and her political activism and its role in the history of "The Movement," between the human struggles and tragedies that engage the audience's empathy and emotions, and the polemics and politics that engage its mind. Her eclectic classical-style music, tinged with some jazz as well as elements evoking gospel, hymn, and Negro spiritual tunes of the Civil Rights Movement era, effectively prepares, supports, or reinforces the text.

The work could perhaps use a bit more tightening, particularly in Act I to reduce its total number of these shifts, and consequently the potential for confusion in the viewer's mind. Watkins, in a chat with me at intermission, indicated that she is not through working to perfect it.

Marvin J. Ward was a founder of Classical Voice of New England. Since April 2011, he is a Five Colleges Associate with Five Colleges, Inc., based at Smith College in Northampton, MA. His research and writing focus on music, currently French, and performances on historic pianos at the Frederick Collection in Ashburnham, MA.

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