



NEW JERSEY

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**QuickTakes!**

## **Kean University Inspires Dialog on Race and Justice Through an Oral History Project**

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Kean University professor Abigail Perkiss is a historian whose research focuses on the history of race and urban space in her native city, Philadelphia. Professor Perkiss recently partnered with student performers from Philadelphia's Hip H'Opera on an oral history project that was part of the development of *We Shall Not Be Moved*, which premiered September 16 at Philadelphia's Wilma Theater.



*Bill T. Jones leads a rehearsal for We Shall Not Be Moved.*

*We Shall Not Be Moved* tells the story of five North Philly teens who seek refuge from the police in an abandoned house in West Philadelphia that once served as the headquarters of the MOVE organization. MOVE was a Philadelphia-based group founded in 1972 with the mission of agitating for racial justice and against police brutality. A 1985 standoff at MOVE headquarters

infamously ended with a neighborhood destroyed and 11 people dead, including five children.

In spring 2017, Hip H'Opera students began an effort to collect the oral histories of individuals who were directly impacted by the tragic events depicted in *We Shall Not Be Moved*. Dr. Perkiss worked with the students to develop questions and collect interviews with people affected by the MOVE bombing.

Dr. Perkiss strives to push and encourage her students to think critically about the past, and to draw connections between what has come before and how we understand and negotiate the world today. She uses history to craft compelling narratives and her work thrives at the intersection of storytelling and social change.

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“I see storytelling as a way of breaking down boundaries and bringing people together in meaningful dialogue. It becomes an entry point for understanding and reconciliation,” she said. “Working with Opera Philadelphia and Hip H’Opera on *We Shall Not Be Moved* affirmed for me why I do this work.”

Hip H’opera, a collaboration between Opera Philadelphia and Art Sanctuary, is dedicated to engaging Philadelphia high school students in creative projects with a community focus. *We Shall Not Be Moved* is the work of acclaimed composer Daniel Bernard Roumain and librettist Marc Barmuthi Joseph, an artist known for combining art with activism and spoken-word performance. The opera’s choreographer is Bill T. Jones, a Kennedy Center honoree and MacArthur genius award winner.

*We Shall Not Be Moved* is a work of historical significance and yet it is startlingly contemporary, addressing the themes of social justice and police violence. A screening of highlights from the oral histories, called *The Un/Sung Stories of We Shall Not Be Moved*, debuted at the African American Museum in Philadelphia on September 9.