

["KUMBAYAH" PLAYING]

(SINGING) Somebody's crying, Lord

Kumbayah

Somebody's praying, Lord

Kumbayah

Somebody's crying, Lord

Kumbayah

Somebody's praying, Lord

Kumbayah

NINA MOINI: This performance of the song "Kumbayah" by VocalEssence is the first thing you'll hear at a special Juneteenth play. For 30 years, Rose McGee has celebrated Juneteenth by sharing her stage performance of *Kumbayah-- The Juneteenth Story* across Minnesota. Rose joins me now to talk about the show, which you can see next Friday. Thanks for coming back on the show, Rose. Good to have you.

ROSE MCGEE: Oh, Nina, I thank you. You didn't need to start by having me boo-hooing all over the place listening to that song.

[LAUGHTER]

NINA MOINI: It's beautiful. Wow, 30 years ago, you wrote this play. Juneteenth was not a federal holiday. Maybe as many people didn't know about it or celebrated at the time. What do you think had been missing from people's understanding of Juneteenth?

ROSE MCGEE: The education of what Juneteenth was. I was asked 30-plus years ago, actually, to write something or create something that would help people understand what Juneteenth meant. There was the beautiful parade that was happening in Minneapolis. There was the beautiful time for people to gather and have food and entertainment. But they didn't what they were really celebrating. So that's what I was able to do, was to create this production that featured intergenerational group of young people, as well as elders, to tell the story.

NINA MOINI: And I understand not only have you been doing this for 30 years, but you add a little something special every year. And this year, of course, it includes VocalEssence singing "Kumbayah," which we heard there at the beginning, and a special march. Tell us about that.

ROSE MCGEE: Yeah, the play talks about the Black people learning about their freedom in June, on or around the 19th of June, thus the term Juneteenth. And yet, much has happened since then. So this year, we're incorporating what we're calling the Progressive March. And we'll have some community folks march in as VocalEssence, directed by G. Phillip Shoultz, will be sharing that song. And people will come in and be according to their position or their professions, such as clergy and education and elders. Yeah, excited about that.

And we have added also an opening scene that's quite different. And that's the abduction right in the beginning in the marketplace. And I'm so excited that one of Twin Cities' most-- our fashion icon, who has such a beautiful selection of fashions, Miss Keiona Cook, she'll be a part of that as well.

NINA MOINI: She's lovely. I've met her a few times. This play tells the story, as you mentioned, of how Black people were enslaved, then emancipated. And it's narrated by Frederick Douglass, who, of course, is one of the most important leaders of the movement for African-American civil rights. Why is it important to tell the story from that point of view?

ROSE MCGEE: I'm so glad you asked that question. When I first started writing this story, I had to go to who we consider to be the guru of Minnesota, and that's Elder Mahmoud El-Kati. And as I listened to him many, many days share his perspective of Juneteenth, he always talked about the significance of Frederick Douglass.

He talked about him from the historical perspective as well as his role during the whole time that people were trying to free people and his coming around to visit folks in various parts of the country, including Minnesota. He was actually right down there in Mankato-- who would have thought-- talking to abolitionists and bringing that word. So, yeah, I wanted that to be a prominent position in the play.

NINA MOINI: Of course, yeah. I wonder if over the 30 years, if you have noticed people maybe generationally coming back or coming back with their children? Or you mentioned elders earlier on. What have you seen in terms of the audience over the years?

ROSE MCGEE: Oh, my goodness. Yes, they do, even the cast. Can I just talk about the cast a little bit, Nina?

NINA MOINI: Sure!

ROSE MCGEE: I know we're limited on time. But when we first started this 30 years ago, one of the main characters was a young man who was a student, high school student, freshman. And he did that play all through high school. And then for two years while he was in college in Florida, he would come back to do it. And that young man grew up to be-- well, he was already Melvin Carter. But he became the mayor, first African-American mayor in--

NINA MOINI: Oh, wow. OK.

ROSE MCGEE: --St. Paul.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, of course.

ROSE MCGEE: And then the director of the play, by the way, is Roslyn Harmon. And she's now mayor of Golden Valley. And she was a teenager when she first started learning to direct this production.

NINA MOINI: You're just churning out civic leaders.

ROSE MCGEE: I know, I know! And Anthony Galloway and his wife, Alanna, they started in this production when they were in high school. And now Anthony, of course, is playing that role of Frederick Douglass. The cast originally was Mr. Bobby Hickman, who's now become an ancestor. He's passed on. He's the father of Robin Hickman, the nephew of Gordon Parks. And there's just so many people that I could talk about in this production.

I've been honored that my own children have been involved in it. And my son Adam, he started out as one of the children in the play in the beginning. He's now creating technical designs. And now his daughter, my little granddaughter, who's eight years old, is in the play also.

NINA MOINI: Well, this is more than a play you're describing, right? It's representative of community. And it's just beautiful. It's beautiful to hear those stories about multiple generations. So thank you for sharing that. Well, I know, too, though, that you've traveled across the state and even to other states. So it's a part of really everybody's story, right? How important has it been to you to share this more widely?

ROSE MCGEE: Well, this is where I have to thank Minnesota Humanities Center for having the faith and confidence in this play and what it offers in terms of a creative way of educating. So we took the play to four cities. We did a tour in Minnesota. I think we went to Duluth, St. Cloud. We went to Rochester, Minnesota, St. Peter, Minnesota. And it was just received so, so beautifully.

And something else I was going to mention, too, is we were talking about the audience. The audience gets a chance after each production to be engaged by listening to the cast talk, respond, and ask questions, share their own perspectives of what's going on in their communities, what they consider to be action items that they can now do to make their communities a better place.

And I think of it as just being a wonderful time for community to talk about how hope and joy have been a part of what we do. We know the struggle. The struggle is very real, and even more so in many ways by many today. But there's also perseverance, and there's resistance, and there's persistence. But there's joy as well.

NINA MOINI: Do you think this is something for all ages to see together? Or how do you think it can be helpful for all ages, really?

ROSE MCGEE: Well, I'm excited. We've got two shows that morning. And the performance is actually at O'Shaughnessy Auditorium, which is over at the--

NINA MOINI: St. Kate's.

ROSE MCGEE: --St. Katherine University. And that morning show is for students. And we are booked. The auditorium is filled, primarily with students from Freedom Schools, which is a part of the Children's Defense Fund. But we also have students from the WE WIN Institute, from Project Success, the ARTS-Us Organization. And just a wonderful time for summer programs to bring their students. We always ask that they prep their students so that they come with some sort of knowledge about Juneteenth. Yeah. And then in the afternoon, we have the general public. And if I can tell this story really quickly.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

ROSE MCGEE: There's a little boy who's in our play this year who had been sitting in the audience for two years with his grandmother watching this play. And he told her he wanted to be up there on stage. And he will be on stage with us this year.

[LAUGHTER]

NINA MOINI: That's a lovely story. No, thank you for sharing. So people can become engaged. They can see the play happening next Friday. Just before we do have to go, Rose, how does it feel to see more people learning about, embracing, celebrating Juneteenth? You've kind of had a unique perspective on this over the last 30 years.

ROSE MCGEE: Yeah, it's been great. There are so many communities now recognizing Juneteenth. And again, I want to just give accolades to the Minnesota Humanities Center because we kicked off our first event today with a wonderful, wonderful brunch that featured Clint Smith. It was fabulous.

And then we've got this wonderful event next week, Feeding Our Souls, where we will hear from six chefs as they talk about why they cook food the way they do and a significance to Juneteenth. And then on that Sunday, we've got OMG, which is run by a film organization by Miss Monique Linder. The film itself is featured around the arts. And that'll be at Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

NINA MOINI: Wonderful. There's plenty of events. I encourage people to look them up and check them out. Thank you so much, Rose, for your time. Really appreciate you.

ROSE MCGEE: Well, I thank you. Thank you. And come, please.

NINA MOINI: Rose McGee is the creator of the play, *Kumbayah-- The Juneteenth Story*. You can see that performance, again, Friday, June 26, at 2:00 PM at St. Katherine University.