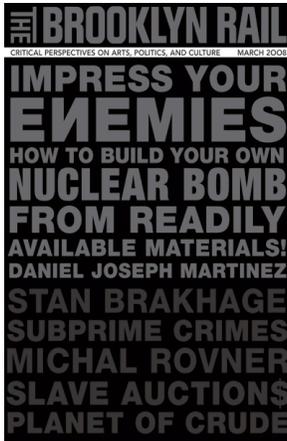


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## Blessed And Holy Confusion

by Nathan Schneider

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### Can a dose of religion save Washington Square Park?

“Killing? I thought it was renovation,” says Ben, an SUV-driving pop artist. He is a character in “Revolt of the Castrati,” a new play by Edwin Lynch. Lynch reads Ben’s line under Judson Memorial Church’s grand arch enclosing a La Farge rose window. He was right to be perplexed; that night, from what was said and done and from the thing in question, it was hard to know the difference.



Inside Judson Memorial Church.

On the evening of February 6th, Judson held an Ash Wednesday service for Washington Square Park. It was billed as part elegy, part political action. Rev. Donna Schaper, the church’s Senior Minister, made sure there was no mistake about the church’s explicit use of a day traditionally set aside to recall human sinfulness: “We do not equate Washington Square Park with Jesus!”

Just across the street, behind a chain-link fence, construction equipment lay scattered in the park. The fence first went up around the central fountain on December 19th. Rev. Schaper, despite serving on an advisory board for the proposed renovation, didn’t know it would really happen until coming to work that day. Since 2005, the Parks Department’s effort to redesign Washington Square Park has been mired in committees and lawsuits against the resistance of some neighborhood residents. The plans involve narrowing paths, erecting a new wrought-iron fence, and moving the park’s fountain to align it with the iconic arch. In the process, the open spaces where street performers and artists have operated will shrink.

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For those who spoke at Judson that night, the changes meant not improvement or renewal but desecration and de-sacralization. Jesus or no, it had become a religious issue.

During the "elegy" portion of the service, Rev. Schaper invited those gathered to share their joyful memories: the rudiments, she suggested, of the park's sacredness. One at a time, people rose and spoke of music, of spontaneous creativity, of a place "where the melting pot melts," and "a child's first feel of grass," as well as the park's role in 1960s counterculture. Many of those in attendance cried.

They were angry about a desecration of another kind as well. Bitterness over the renovation escalated when, on January 23rd, workers found human bones underneath the park, relics of its 19th century life as a burial ground for slaves, paupers, and yellow fever victims. For opponents of the changes, the bones have become a new opportunity to draw attention to their cause. "There has been more press about the dead than there is about the living," observed Rev. Schaper. "The dead are acting."

The service ended on a solemn note. Told to sing "We Shall Not Be Moved" but not quite able to stick with it, the congregation took flowers and candles in cups and ambled toward the Washington Square Arch at Fifth Avenue. There, they gathered for a few minutes among a handful of video and TV cameras. They wove their flowers into the chain-link fence and left them there to be seen.

The great-granddaughter of architect Stanford White, who designed both the arch and Judson, was among them. A passionate speaker with long, red hair, she said, "that is my grandmother," pointing to one of the angelic figures carved above in relief.

The cover of the service's program replicated a flyer for a 1961 "right to sing rally" at Judson during the city's efforts to ban folk singing in the park. The spirits of the '60s lives on in this neighborhood as those gathered at Judson were proud of the reputation that Village residents have acquired among city officials. "We are told we are a culture of opposition," Rev. Schaper announced, and was answered with applause.

A culture of opposition needs an opponent; Edwin Lynch's play spoke of "renovating infidels." At Judson, the demonic personae included the Parks Department, NYU and their cronies who allegedly obstructed residents' efforts to participate in the redesign process. Their base motives seemed obvious: an attempt to wrest the park from the poor and from the performers who obstruct its market-friendly predictability. As such, Washington Square

Park has become a theater in apocalyptic struggles against corporatization, gentrification, uglification, and the whole bounty of such unwanted hegemonies.

Amidst the rhetoric of opposition, particular people come to play the roles of Lynch's infidels. On the flurry of websites raised up against the redesign, YouTube videos have been posted that catch the redesigner himself, George Vellonakis, ranting about the futility of opposing his plans.

Gil Horowitz of the Washington Square Park Association joined the infidels as well with an op-ed in *The Villager* last September. He claimed that the park of the '60s folksingers was already destroyed by Robert Nichols' 1969 renovation. The opposition fired back with letters to the editor, placing him among "the real estate developers who want the changes for their own greedy reasons." Horowitz was present at the Ash Wednesday service, and the next day Rev. Schaper discovered he had left minutes' worth of angry voicemail. "The Reverend misled people," he claimed, by making the redesign look like a conspiracy against musicians and the poor. "I came from poverty, and I feel and vibrate and resonate with poor people. It is a cruel hoax to the poor to say they can live in the park." As for the park since '69, "I think it's a garbage pit."

In Judson's offices the next day, Rev. Schaper reflected on opponents of the renovation and the previous night's service. Thoughtful deliberation had replaced urgency. She admitted, "I was really working against my clap lines. I was trying not to demonize anybody." The culture of opposition that had been worn like a badge of pride now became a complex force to be reckoned with, for better or worse.

All parties involved had complex roles to play. NYU has reasons to oppose the redesign, which affects its commencement ceremony. The opposition is eager to speak for the homeless, yet urban sociologist Harvey Molotch asserted that they have found other parks even more inviting after recent redesigns. Rev. Schaper is sympathetic to Dr. Molotch's observations, just as she is to the convictions of the opposition.

She insisted that the real desecration was not the redesign itself but how the community had been excluded from the design process. Yet this point of process seemed too subtle to carry the Ash Wednesday elegy-turned-protest. Though workers had already begun tearing up the park, for many that day, the goal was still clear: to reverse the course of the city's plans and save the park as they knew it. Outrage, more than process, seemed to be their means.

Rev. Schaper allowed this to become the rallying cry in her sanctuary, but afterward she refused to be so stubborn. "Something is going to be different

over there, and we don't want to be the kind of people who say, 'Nothing can ever change.'" Even with the bones dug up, the fountain moved, the iron fence in place, and the pathways narrowed, there is no saying what will become of life in Washington Square Park.

My real complaint with the twentieth century and the twenty-first century," Schaper told me, "is the absence of ritual." She wishes that the city had told the community when work would begin to allow them a chance to say goodbye. But could they have? The self-empowerment, passion, and conscience of so many Village residents surely demand something fiercer. Compared to standing in front of the bulldozers, a candlelit vigil felt like standing by.

Greenwich Village may be one of the most politically active communities in the world. Yet perhaps this legacy comes at a cost—an unwillingness to welcome the kind of change that isn't clamored for, demanded, utopic, and specifically radical. By discovering their power over the world, both the culture of opposition and the symmetry-craving redesigners set aside the illogic and impracticality of ritual. Ritual becomes, rather, a means to an end: Ash Wednesday as political opportunity. While the Village's utopianism begs for a ritual to prefigure its hopes, opportunism leaves little room for it. People were disappointed as they stood with their candles and flowers under the arch. Not enough cameras had come from the evening news stations. Using ritual as a tool, they distracted themselves from being possessed by it.

In an invocation that came early in the service, Rev. Schaper pointed to how ritual might become possible again: "Join us in our blessed and holy confusion!" Not, for the moment, in correctness and resolution. Ritual, such as it is, begins with discovering powerlessness before the bulldozers.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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