

Heaven Down Here

Chamber opera by Andrew Jamieson

Libretto by Andrew Jamieson with text compiled from:

- Tapes recorded at Peoples Temple, used with permission from the Jonestown Institute
- An article in the 1977 *New West* magazine by Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy, used with permission from the authors
- Articles from 1977 issues of Peoples Temple's *Peoples Forum* publication
- An adaptation by Jim Jones of *Down From His Glory* by William E. Booth-Clibborn, as heard on the 1974 album *He's Able* by the Peoples Temple choir.
- An original adaptation of *When We All Get to Heaven* by Eliza E. Hewitt
- Other African American spirituals and traditional religious and rally songs.

ACT I:

Scene I:

Pictures of neighborhoods in San Francisco and Oakland in the mid 1970s. These pictures are designed to highlight social inequality and racial injustice and oppression. Perhaps pictures of police brutality, incarceration, extreme poverty, neglect and health problems. Especially death or even mass death. One by one, four members come on stage from the "city" and walk into a set of chairs with a sign over it that says "Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ Denominational Brotherhood, Jim Jones, Pastor."

Jones is standing at the "entrance" to the church, shaking hands with newcomers.

Ann is thrown out at one of the doors, and wanders aimlessly around the stage looking down depressed.

Minister: (to Ann) Only God can help you.

Ann: God hasn't done anything for me.

Temple Member #1 gets up from chairs and approaches Ann.

Ann: God is racist and unfair, just like the world we live in. God doesn't care about us.

Temple Member #1: Have you tried coming to my Father? He is a great healer. He is a great liberator. He is a great Father for all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, white and black, rich and poor, old and young. Praises be to the revolutionary Christ! Praises be to Jim Jones! Come experience my Father's love. Welcome to Peoples Temple. Welcome to God's love in Jim Jones!

Ann and Temple member #1 walk to the chairs together and shake hands with Jones. Once everyone has sat down, there should be a comforting image on the screen.

Scene 2:

Temple member #2: Experience your Father's love for all through socialism. Your Father cares about ALL people! Jim Jones protects you from racist, capitalist America.

All: (singing) I Shall Not be Moved

Temple member #3: As Jesus says in the book of Matthew, "For I was an hungered and ye gave me meat;

(Members occasionally interject throughout gospel reading, "amen, hallelujah, etc.")

I was thirsty and ye gave me drink;

I was a stranger and ye took me in; Naked, and ye clothed me;

I was sick and ye visited me;

I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

"Then shall the righteous answer him, saying,

When saw we thee an hungered and fed thee?

Or thirsty and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in?

Or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick?

Or in prison, and came unto thee?

“Verily I say unto you,

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these...

...Ye have done it unto me.”

Jones: All ye hungry, be fed, ye thirsty drink. Come home to your Father. Welcome home! Welcome to Peoples Temple.

Temple member #4: They wanted my wife to sign for my autopsy. And wanted to know what undertaker and so on. And she said, I don't believe he's gone yet.

Jones: In five years, none of our people have died. Twenty-four times in a year they've brought the dead in the doors and they've gone out alive!

Jones: I've *come* to set the captive free! To loose the heavy burdens. Rapis Washington. My God, how you must have suffered. Paralyzed. Your *pelvis* was broken, isn't it?

Temple member #5 (Washington): Yeah. (crying)

Jones: Eighteen years ago in an accident. Let's see if I can build your faith. You were born in Louisiana.

Washington: Yes

Jones: But this accident happened in, uh, Mississippi.

Washington: Yes

Jones: Alright. You were visiting your in-laws in Mississippi, and when you went to go to the store with your youngest baby in your arms, a white racist went across the wrong side of the road and struck you down on purpose and fled the scene of the accident.

Washington: Oh my God, yes.

Washington: Yes.

Jones: You suffered the agony of the damned since that day.

Washington: Oh, yes.

Jones: But I have *come* in the *spirit* of my Father. He says these things shall you do and greater, because I go to the Father. The Gospel is upon me to preach to those that are *poor*, and those that are oppressed.

Jones: Doctor Shepherd said that you would have this condition until you died.

Washington: Yes.

Jones: But you got ahold of a *pamphlet* with my *name* on it and, and thought in your mind, "I can't lose, but trying this Jim Jones. Don't you think that there's nothing impossible with God?"

Washington: Yes.

Jones: Stand up, stand up, stand up.

Jones: Stay out of his way. Stay out of the way of the anointing, stay out of the way of the anointing. Stay out of the way of this apostolic anointing, this pure God anointing as it was on the day of Pentecost.

Washington puts his cane down and runs

Jones: Truly wonderful, truly wonderful, praises be to the name of our revolutionary Christ! Praises be to Father!

All: Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh, what he's done for me...

As music continues, Ann slowly walks up to the front of the chairs, and becomes more enthusiastic and begins to participate more.

Scene 3:

All: What a mighty God we serve. What a mighty God we serve. Angels bow before him. Heaven and Earth adore him.

Ann: Peace and love, everyone. My name is Ann. I want to thank God for new hope and new life in the church. I have been in so many churches before, but I didn't find God until I came to Peoples Temple. He surely took me out of that awful place. He put my feet on a rock to stay. He put a song in my soul today, and now, I can sing. Hallelujah!

Instruments and choir play themes from *What a Mighty God We Serve*

Ann: Oh, Jim Jones has come to bring socialism to the united states of America, Hallelujah!

Jones: It's beautiful. I would at one thing to it: CHRISTIAN socialism! (singing over Temple member's "Hallelujah's"): APOSTOLIC Christian socialism. So beautiful, hallelujah.

Jones and Ann: Hallelujah!

Ann with another member: This is like Heaven to us! This IS Heaven, almost.

Marcy Jones: It is only through the miraculous power that sits right here!

Temple member: That's right!

Ann: Amen!

Scene 4:

Other members return to their seats and Jones stands at pulpit.

Jones: You can thank Jesus if you want to. As long as it's not the segregationist Jesus that some churches follow. You ought to have a real, righteous and holy Jesus that preaches equality. A Jesus that loved the whole world. A Jesus that fought against the establishment.

Jesus said, "I was hungry," and he wasn't personally hungry but he said any black, or Indian, or poor white was hungry, he said "there go I hungry."

Down from his glory, ever living story. Your God and savior came. Yes, Jesus was his name.

Born in a manger, to his own a stranger. A man of sorrow, tears, and agony.

Oh how you should love him! How you should adore him! Your breath, your sunshine, your all in all! The great creator became your savior and all God's fullness dwelleth in him!

And some churches preach a skygod that keeps black people down and serves capitalism. But we know that this is a lie! Like the disciples of Christ, we live in socialism. That's what God is -- your conscience socialism. And I am principle socialism. That's what makes me God!

Racist, capitalist America is trying to keep the poor from rising up. They're trying to keep blacks from rising up. They're trying to oppress us with a skygod. You don't need a skygod. They're trying to oppress us with the bible.

Holds up bible

Too many people have been looking at this and not at me! You've got to stop looking in the bible! This book has been keeping black people down for too long.

Throws bible across the room. Ann and congregation gasp, then wait for a dramatic moment, but there isn't one, and they settle down again.

Jones: See, nothing happened. That book can't save us. There's no power in there. No one's going to come out of the sky. Nobody ever came to save us. There's no Heaven up there. We'll have to make Heaven down here.

Applause begins slowly. All stand up, except Ann and interject, "Amen, Hallelujah, Glory, glory, etc.") After a time, they sit down again. Ann walks off to the side, somewhat offended.

Jones: Let us take an offering for the cause of God. Take an envelope and be generous. To whom much is given, much is expected. Show your commitment to the cause. Come up to the front and bring your offering.

Members each bring their offering. Once they have finished, Jones exits through the crowd, shaking hands with members on his way.

Ann (to herself): A bible thrown across the room! That's just too much. I will leave right after the meeting.

ACT II:

Planning commission members are gathered, sitting in a circle. Ann is among them, sitting silently.

Jones: Let us begin our meeting of the planning commission.

Racism and capitalism are growing. We need to help them understand that. What will we tell them?

Commission Member #1: We look around today and see widespread evidence of growing hatred and hostility toward minorities.

Commission Member #2: There are nations around the world where democracy has been subverted. We are seeing the beginnings of it here.

Commission Member #3: The use of the media to publicize spurious charges against black elected officials in recent years has been one disturbing instance.

Commission member #4: Because our church has been unusually active in championing the rights of the oppressed, we have been subjected to repeated instances of provocation, surveillance, spying, wiretapping and outright vandalism and even violence against us.

Commission member #5: We have an organized, orchestrated, premeditated government campaign to destroy a politically progressive church. There is a conspiracy by governmental agencies to destroy the Peoples Temple as a viable community organization.

Jones: That's right. And we need to stop that conspiracy or it will destroy the movement. George, I need you to go keep an eye on them! I need you to keep an eye on her! *(to Ann)*

Pause for music and pictures

Jones: But, if they ever do succeed, we can always leave for the Promised Land.

Change in tone. Panic begins emerge. Commission member #2 leaves.

Commission member #1: Establishment agents have found willing ears in some New West reporters. Rupert Murdoch's media empire is a plague, descending upon the United States. They have talked to some of our former members.

Jones: They have betrayed the cause! Tell them we know where they live and we are keeping an eye on them! We've GOT to stay united. You have to stay loyal to the cause. Those who leave betray the cause. We won't allow any dissidence. We're interested in instilling respect and reverence for the center of this movement. No one has the right to leave, and even if you do come

back, I'll never forget it. There will be consequences. We know who you are and we will come after you.

Commission member #3 (to Ann): You better watch what you do! Father is keeping an eye on you.

Jones: Most important: we MUST make sure we stop them from publishing anything about us that might cause problems.

Commission member #2 enters holding a newspaper.

Commission member #2: Too late! (reading from article) "We began getting phone calls from former temple members. Callers volunteered 'background' about Jim Jones' 'cruelty' to the congregation members, in addition to making several other specific charges."

Jones: Damn them!

Commission member #2: "Based on what these people told us, life inside the Peoples Temple was a mixture of Spartan regimentation, fear and self-imposed humiliation."

Jones: We are in trouble!

Commission member #2: Church leaders also instructed certain members to write letters incriminating themselves in illegal and immoral acts that never happened.

Jones: This will destroy us!

Ann (to herself): What would he do to me if I join them?

Commission member #2: In addition, the temple members were encouraged to turn over their money and property to the church and live communally in temple buildings. Those who didn't ran the risk of being chastised severely during catharsis sessions.

Ann (to herself): There's no use getting upset over one bible thrown across a room. I will help fight racist, capitalist America who is trying to stop us.

Jones: Now is the time. We must leave for the Promised Land. I am leaving right away. The whole Temple should follow as soon as they can! We're leaving tonight.

All: We are in trouble! Let us escape to safety in the Promised Land.

[show that Jones' panic is high, and that it has spread to commission members, and that will spill over into fear among the entire congregation.]

Jones leaves silently while music plays.

ACT III:

Scene I:

Music as people gather.

Announcer: Let us now gather for our evening meeting, and hear a message from our Father Jim Jones.

Once they have gathered:

Congregation: Glory, Hallelujah, we shall not be moved!

In Father's love abiding, we shall not be moved!

The world will not deceive us, we shall not be moved!

Ann: So many people are working against us, threatening us by shooting our Father, bombing his bus, and now they have even published an article to attack us. But we shall not be moved.

All: We shall not be moved!

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Member #1: There's no chariot up there.

All: Coming for to carry us home.

Member #2: God never made no home for us.

Ann: But we have the Promised Land!

Cheers, giving way to more singing.

Scene 2:

[On TV screen.]

Jones: An institution that feeds the poor, houses the homeless, rescues young and old from drug addiction, marshals the political potential of a people, and turns the poor masses into a powerful instrument for justice, freedom, and equality, while building a just and humane society, by its very nature will have many enemies. Our enemies have spread lies against us, and it is only a matter of time before capitalist racist America shuts us down and you will have no one to protect you and care for you.

We may face difficulty, but the movement will live on! You must stay with us. Those who leave betray the cause.

Here in Jonestown, we have demonstrated that cooperative living can provide for everyone's needs. We have tasted life based on principle here and now have no desire to ever live again otherwise.

Now there is peace here. We have found security and fulfillment in this collective life. You should share in the joy of its growth.

You should all come and live out socialism free from oppression in the United States. I don't know why you are all so attached to that racist place. There's no Heaven in the US. Nothing but racism, capitalism and conspiracy. Your life not safe there! People are angry with you! There's no Heaven up there! But we've made Heaven down here! Come home!

Crowd: (Cheers)

Jones: You should all come down here with me. Leave this land of oppression! You're not safe here. People are angry with you.

Crowd: (Cheers)

Jones: I don't know why you all want to stay in the damn United States. I'm ready for Heaven!
Crowd cheers I'm in Heaven, this is Heaven down here!

Crowd: (Cheers)

Jones: Sing the wondrous love of Father,
Sing His mercy and His grace.

In the mansions bright and blessed
He'll prepare for you a place.

When you all get to Heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!
When you all see your Father,
You'll sing and shout the victory!

Scene 3:

Dissidence fades little by little as musical instructions in the score shift from "play anything" to "Yes Father!" a growing unison chorus.

We're on our way to Heaven, we shall not be moved! Just as a tree is planted by the water, we shall not be moved.

someone: (interspersed with Jones' phrases) Everyone pack up your belongings. Get on busses for the airport. There, you'll get on a plane for New York. Then, you'll take a flight to Georgetown, Guyana. Then, we'll get you on a boat straight to the Promised Land! Jonestown!

People begin to leave.

All: I'm on my way to Heaven, I shall not be moved. Just as a tree is planted by the water. I shall not be moved.

Jones: Come home (repeated over and over, along with phrases like, "Heaven" "See you all in the promised land" etc.)

All: Yes, Father