

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Daniel Madoff

Homage to the Passed

by Ellen Miller

"Is this a ghost tour?" a person passing by asks. "It's a performance," I correct, not realizing how prescient their question will prove to be.

On *Buried Ground* opens at [Christ Church Burial Ground](#) at twilight. Tiny, lit bulbs are scattered across the ground, the burial stones, the standing headstones. We meet performer Arianna Polite in front of the grave of Benjamin Franklin. Polite invites the audience to wander across the burial ground's two acres and observe the stories of Black Philadelphians.

Near the entrance, we meet Violet, portrayed by Naimah Murray, seated in a chair while a Black woman, portrayed by song aziza tucker, combs her hair. "I will cornrow the way home," the voiceover narrates as Murray rises, jumping sideways onto tucker's back, wrapping her arms around her neck. Violet, a real Black Philadelphian, was born enslaved and died young. She was buried in an unmarked grave at Christ Church Burial Ground.

A tolling bell encourages the audience to shuffle, hear a new story, and each section begins again. Towards the back of the burial ground, two girls play together, first hopscotch and then hide-and-seek. Along a side path, a father and daughter dance amid a sea of tiny lights, as though dancing on stars. Facing him, she does three successive supported pirouettes.

As the sun descends, the performers are lit by the tiny lights and lanterns along the path. In the darkness, they evoke the angels or ghosts they portray.

Carrying lanterns, the performers summon us: come, come, one final dance. United, they stand on the main path and collapse over at the waist, rising slowly as one. We are bade to move on from the burial ground.

The show breaks for a brief intermission at the [Groundings](#) exhibition at Christ Church Neighborhood House, open through January 1,

2025, which shares more about *On Buried Ground*. When the bell tolls again, we enter historic Christ Church and are seated in the pews.

We meet [Alice](#), portrayed by Rhonda Moore. She narrates this section of the performance. We hear thundering feet in the balconies above, and the children return downstairs, finding a pew. The jarring noises of the slave market that stood at 2nd and Market take us out of the joy of the moment and remind us of the reality of where we are seated. The dancers run back and forth, jumping into seats throughout the audience. “Go, go,” they whisper.

As Cory Seals’ rich vibrato rings out, singing “witness” over and over, this is our call to action: to acknowledge the complexity of Philadelphia’s history, and to honor the Black Philadelphians who were disrespected and abused in life and forgotten in death.

On Buried Ground originated as a performance series including the *Remember Them* solo dance performance choreographed by [Shayla-Vie Jenkins and performed by Jenkins in 2021](#).

[On Buried Ground](#), Christ Church, Fringe Festival 2024, September 4-14, 2024.

Alt Text: A young Black woman (Arianna Polite) holds a wooden bowl glowing with warm white light. She looks downward, sprinkling marbles of light onto the ground as darkness falls after sunset.

A mature Black woman (Rhonda Moore) stands in the center of two rows of pews with her arms outstretched. She grips the side of one pew reaching towards the open palm of another Black woman (Song Aziza Tucker) who stands in George Washington’s pew at Christ Church.

By Ellen Miller

September 15, 2024