

# THE GHOSTS OF CABRINI-GREEN .....

A Dramaturgical Essay by Associate Director, Dramaturg, and Artistic Associate Wendy Mateo

*This is a story where history meets myth. It's a story about living—living with ghosts of decisions past, and the ensuing systems which haunt our present. Jane Byrne's stay at Cabrini-Green inhabits a unique intersection in Chicago's story. The Machine, The Outfit, Law Enforcement, Segregation, Gangs, and the Chicago Housing Authority all meet here in a "Six Corners" of Chicago history, culminating in the events of one fateful 1981 Easter celebration. Cabrini-Green is a small piece of land, riddled with a big, burdensome past, and haunted by the actions of all who have stood on or for those "Six Corners."*

## 1880–1930 .....

*The haunting begins a century prior...*

Before it became Cabrini, it was called "Little Hell," owing to the large gas house (at Crosby and Hobbie) whose flames lit the night skies. The roar of its furnaces was heard for blocks. Hot coal in its ovens was moistened with water from the Chicago River to create gas for heating, cooking and lighting. Jane Byrne's own grandfather emigrated from County Mayo, Ireland, landing right smack-dab in Little Hell, and giving Jane a primal connection to this infamous place.

Irish and Italian gangs roved its streets and wreaked havoc upon the city. In fact, the heart of Little Hell (at Oak and Milton), called "Death Corner," was the scene of over 100 unsolved murders. By the 1920s, murders in Little Hell, many born of rivalry between the gangs of Joe Aiello and Al Capone, continued at a rate of more than 30 per year. As notorious as Cabrini-Green would become, the violence of Little Hell may have been worse. But by 1934, FDR's creation of the Federal Housing Administration spurred construction of public housing across America, and thus turned focus onto reforming Little Hell.

## 1940s + 50s .....

*Cabrini begins already haunted by the ghosts of Prohibition and murder...*

Construction started in 1942 on the Frances Cabrini Rowhouses, the first 586 public housing units in the former Little Hell. After completion in 1945, the Chicago Housing Authority began a crusade to build 40,000 units in the area. But the practice of "redlining" (banks refusing to loan money for property purchases or improvements in black neighborhoods) contributed to "white flight," and set the tone for changing demographics in communities like Cabrini. Still, Cabrini-Green was unique among projects in Chicago. For, layered on top of Cabrini was a veneer of idealism—a promise to house people of all colors and walks of life together in the heart of the city, minutes away from Chicago's most affluent neighborhoods, where they could raise their families in safety. But, the truth went down another street.

When WWII ended, the war economy ground to a halt, and Black people lost their jobs. Those positions were taken by their White counterparts, allowing *them* to earn enough to buy homes, while Cabrini filled up with Black Americans who could not otherwise afford housing.

*Enter the ghosts of broken promises and ghettoization...*

## 60s + 70s .....

Organized crime, since the days of Little Hell, maintained a powerful hold on the area. It controlled the drug flow, which supplied the gangs, which escalated crime in Cabrini to an

all-time high by 1968. Throw in nationwide tensions over the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, and it all lit a match in the tinder box of Cabrini-Green.

In April 1968, after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., police reported sniper fire directed at them from 1230 N. Larrabee, while riots and fires raged all over Chicago. In the aftermath, on April 15, Mayor Richard J. Daley instituted a shoot-to-kill policy against arsonists and a shoot-to-maim policy against looters. Add the assassination of Robert Kennedy in June, and the scene was set for the events around the Democratic National Convention in Chicago (August 26-29), where protests were put down by excessive force as the whole world watched.

In 1969, the assassination of Illinois Black Panther Party Chairman Fred Hampton (along with fellow Panther Mark Clark) worsened tensions between Black residents of Chicago and law enforcement. During his brief time as chairman, Hampton made a big impact on social justice. He formed the “Rainbow Coalition” and helped establish the Free Breakfast for School Children Program in Chicago, which is how he and Marion Stamps began collaborating. Marion deeply respected Fred, learning much from him, and his death impacted her significantly. Authorities claimed that the Panthers opened fire on police while being served with a warrant. But evidence from that night indicated the FBI, the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, and the CPD worked together to assassinate Hampton.

In July 1970, another sniper attack from two buildings surrounding Seward Park further drove law enforcement away from policing Cabrini-Green. Not only were two officers gunned down, but the blasts also struck a little boy, Jonas Edwards. Following a standoff with the snipers, police stormed the towers, practically locking them down. They kicked down doors and made arrests. After this incident, the police effectively abandoned patrolling these projects, while residents, in turn, became further distrustful of law enforcement.

Throughout this era, much of Chicago’s Democratic political machine worked in synch with Chicago organized crime, commonly known as “the Outfit.” This was especially true in the historically corrupt First Ward, which at the time included Cabrini-Green. Its alderman since 1968, Fred Roti, took direction from, among others, Outfit boss Pat Marcy. In fact, Roti himself would later be indicted and go to prison for corruption, and one aspect of his corruption was neglect of public housing. Between the Machine (which used reliably Democratic-voting Black Americans as electoral pawns), the Outfit (which used Cabrini to bolster their drug, gambling, and prostitution profits), and the Gangster Disciples (which became one of Chicago’s most powerful non-Outfit street gangs), Cabrini-Green entered the ‘80s haunted by still more specters: Neglect, Distrust, Corruption.

## **1981** .....

Jane Byrne, Chicago’s first female mayor, had been in office for 2 years. She’d run on the platform that, though mentored by Richard J. Daley, she would not perpetuate the ills of the Machine—that she was a woman, mother, widow, and wife, and she’d fight for “you.” In the spring of 1981, right before Byrne arrived in Cabrini, a war between rival gangs, the Mickey Cobras and Black Gangster Disciples, had left 10 people dead and 37 wounded. Byrne was driven by a conviction that if she could go to Cabrini, and bring real change there, it would permeate throughout the city. If she could make Cabrini safe, she could make the city safe, and secure her legacy as mayor.

This is where we begin. This is the scene, at rise, where we’ll witness characters from Jane Byrne to Marion Stamps wrestle with identity, their place in this system, and their hopes for Chicago’s future...all while haunted by the ghosts of Cabrini’s past. ■