

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 30, 2010 at 9:48am

Martyred women are 'old friends' to composer

by Retta Blaney



Elizabeth Swados with Billy Bob (Roz Lichter)

Her piano is surrounded by folders of musical works in progress. All are important to her, but one in particular stirs her soul. Acclaimed composer Elizabeth Swados, like many people around the world, was touched deeply by the rape and murder of four American churchwomen in El Salvador on Dec. 2, 1980. Their stories of faith and commitment forever altered her consciousness and now, for the 30th anniversary of their deaths, she is composing an oratorio that will remember the tragedy while celebrating the positive changes it brought about.

Drawing upon stories from family members, from those who continue serving the poor in centers set up in the women's names, and from the wisdom of Isaiah, Ecclesiastes and John's Gospel, "Resilient Souls" is evoking something good from the darkest places," Swados says. "It's about strength and resilience. It's a celebration of ancestry, of things being handed down after 30 years. It's a family of people who have lived through it."

Sinking into a large, overstuffed sofa in her book-lined Soho loft in New York, the petite 59-year-old writer appears almost engulfed by all the space and size around her. With her beloved dogs, a large,

brown poodle named Billy Bob, and Clementine, a friendly, multicolored, young Labradoodle, lounging nearby, she takes time on a gorgeous October afternoon to talk about the women who are frequently in her thoughts. She never met Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford and Jean Donovan, but she developed an intimate relationship with them over the decade she spent composing "Missionaries," a choral drama that told their stories at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1997 and then in churches and performance spaces around the country.

It was her strong Jewish sensibility to never forget that compelled her to write "Missionaries" and now to follow through with "Resilient Souls." That call to remember is also behind the musical she is creating for next spring's 100th anniversary commemoration of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 garment workers, most of them young women working in sweatshop conditions in a building not far from her loft. She sees similarities in the changes that came about because of each tragedy.

"It changed America, that fire. It made the unions happen, specifically the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. In another 70 years we'll look back at those women and how we look at missionaries and dictatorships and what it's like to die for a cause. We'll look back and see the four of them were a marker for change, [Archbishop Oscar] Romero along with them. It's why I wrote "Missionaries" in the first place."

What the rape and murder of the women by government death squads brought to light in the intense worldwide media spotlight that followed was a recognition of the corrupt governments in Central and South America and the role the United States played in supporting their dictatorial regimes. "Resilient Souls" will touch on that, while highlighting the missionary spirit that was fired up by the horror, as well as the organizations, schools and centers that have been named for the women and that carry on their work of caring for the poor and oppressed.

"This piece will emphasize that from the deepest darkness a new kind of light is coming as contemporary generations are bravely going into the most dangerous, impoverished countries and putting their lives on the line to give the poor food, schooling and self-esteem," Swados said.

Unlike "Missionaries," with its cast of 20 needed to tell the story, "Souls" will have four leads and a chorus of 10 who also will fill the roles of the current speakers. Songs will alternate between examining the murders and corruption and celebrating the spirit of each woman and the echo they have left for future generations.

"They are so much a part of me," Swados says. "They have so inhabited me. It was like visiting old friends. It was nice to be with them again. It was horrific to revisit the agony again, but they've been such a part of my artistic consciousness. They still get me through if I'm chickening out on something."

Swados says "Missionaries" is the favorite of all of her work, and she has quite a lot to choose from. Among her achievements: Two of her shows have been on Broadway, "Doonesbury" and "Runaways," the latter earning her Tony nominations for best musical, best direction of a musical, best book of a musical, best original score and best choreography. She has written music for movies and TV, published several novels and several nonfiction books, plus nearly a dozen for children.

Money raised from the December performances of "Resilient Souls" will benefit the Maura Clarke-Ita Ford Center in Bushwick, Brooklyn, N.Y., which provides education and economic programs that enable immigrant women to find work. The center was founded by Mary Burns, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, and it was codirected in its early years by Ursuline Sr. Mary Dowd. It was "the Marys," as Swados calls them, who approached Swados and asked her to write something positive for the 30th anniversary. In spite of a workload that included the Shirtwaist musical and another musical whose

subject she doesn't disclose, the setting of all of Roald Dahl's poems to music, teaching at New York University and traveling to Abu Dhabi to create and stage an orientation musical for incoming students at New York University's campus there, she said yes to the Marys without hesitation, and with no expectation of pay. 'I never take money from nuns,' she said.

Getting to know the Marys and other sisters over the years through 'Missionaries,' and having been inspired by the four women, has made her want to work for the poor as well, so much so that she is hoping to go to Liberia to use theater to help traumatized children.

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'My religion is not observant,' she said. 'Musically is where I feel the sense of God really strongly.'

Along with the caring for the poor, the commitment of sisters also impresses her. 'Their generosity and selflessness and the twinkle, the not being so self-important, helps me focus my own beliefs, to not be so self-serious,' she says. 'They don't dwell, they just get on with it. That's a huge thing to learn.'

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*, which includes interviews with Kristin Chenoweth, Edward Herrmann, Liam Neeson, Phylicia Rashad and Vanessa Williams.]

For more information

Pax Christi Metro New York is collaborating with the Maura Clarke-Ita Ford Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., to present the new musical produced by Elizabeth Swados (LizSwados.com). 'Resilient Souls' will be performed at St. Francis College in Brooklyn on Dec. 1 at 7 p.m.; at the Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village on Dec. 3 at 8 p.m.; and at the Mary Louis Academy in Queens on Dec. 5 at 2 p.m. Proceeds from ticket sales will benefit the work of the Maura Clarke-Ita Ford Center, which provides educational and job training programs to enable immigrant women to become economically independent. Visit www.mauraclarke-itafordcenter.org to purchase tickets.

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