

Playwright pays tribute to King's civil rights work

Meeting with Kennedy is play's focus

By Anthony P. Musso
For Focus

A one-time meeting between President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is the subject of a one-act play that will be performed free at the Muddy Cup in Beacon on Monday, a national holiday in honor of the civil rights leader.

The play, written and performed by playwright Michael Monasterial, along with actor Brett Owen is produced by the Passing the Torch Through the Arts program, a Kingston-based theater group founded by Monasterial and focused on helping to enlighten and educate at-risk youth through the medium of theater.

"The impetus of the program is based on my own background," Monasterial said. "When I was growing up, I was one of those kids that got into a lot of trouble. I used to hang out with bad friends, instead of with good friends."

Monasterial credited a teacher at Roosevelt High School in Yonkers as having the single



Courtesy photo

Actor and playwright Michael Monasterial, left, portrays Martin Luther King Jr., while Brett Owen, right, portrays President John F. Kennedy in Monasterial's new one-act play "King and Kennedy."

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Group aims to involve kids in theater

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most important effect on redirecting his focus and future by simply encouraging him to engage in more positive activities — in his case, theater.

“Joyce Neal taught music and was the only African-American teacher at the school,” he said. “I was always clowning around and she saw me acting out scenes with my friends in the hallways. She asked me to take a part in the school show, ‘The Music Man,’ and it was the first time I had ever received a positive comment from someone. It was a great experience and it turned

everything around for me.”

Monasterial began to associate with a better crowd, read more and became focused on setting into place a plan for his future.

“I went on to attend Westchester Community College and started Three Brothers Theater there with two friends,” he said. “The three of us were all middle-class minority kids, had done the wrong things earlier in life and wanted to express our own experiences through theater productions. The program went over well, and from skills gained dealing with the arts we got confidence in being able to express ourselves.”

Monasterial said he formed Passing the Torch specifically for youngsters who may be experiencing what he faced years ago.

“I wanted to do something for the kids that are forgotten and written off,” he said. “Programs in the area approached me to teach acting but they were all geared toward the good kids. I wanted to focus on the bad kids, the ones that are just like I was.”

Monasterial recently developed a 35-minute classroom production, one he hopes to present at local schools in an attempt to generate more interest in the program.

“We want to do the classic plays and bring it to the kids,” he said. “We performed at Phoenix Academy in Westchester, which is an alternative learning center for some really challenging kids. There were 300 of them and we were a bit apprehensive at first. At the end of the show they applauded and were so emotional. It was amazing.”

Monasterial explained his motivation for writing King and Kennedy: “When it was really decided that Obama was going to make a strong run for president, there was a lot of conversation about the possibility of him getting assassinated,” he said. “I thought to myself, what was it like for a John F. Kennedy and a Martin Luther King when they were doing what they were at the height of the civil rights movement?”

“King was getting multiple death threats everyday. He could have just stopped at that point and led a quiet life but because of his commitment to what he wanted to do, because he believed it was more important than him personally, he continued on,” he said. “The play focuses on that; the idea that doing what you believe in is more important than you personally.”

“King and Kennedy” received

Resources

The Muddy Cup is at 129 Main St., Beacon. For additional information or to learn more about Passing the Torch Through the Arts, visit www.passingthetorchthroughthearts.com

The play is directed by Elizabeth Fraser Barrows, who met Monasterial at the Art Society of Kingston.

“I grew up in the city acting and directing before I relocated to the Hudson Valley,” Barrows said. “When I met Michael, I told him about an evening of Shakespeare that my theater group performed at Orange Community College. We began to discuss our mutual desire to bring classic shows into the classroom and making it a live, real and tangible thing.”

“‘King and Kennedy’ makes these people very real,” she said. “There are parts of actual speeches in the play and what Michael wrote are conversations between these historical figures. It makes them real and easy to relate to.”

Lisa Miller is the event coordinator of six Muddy Cup operations throughout the Hudson Valley.

“Our Muddy Cup locations are focused on reaching out to the community and establishing a venue where local artists can show their wares and introduce arts to our kids,” Miller said. “If you look at an event like Passing the Torch, it’s our history. It’s a way to keep ourselves close to our heritage and all the things that matter.”

In addition to “King and Kennedy,” the group will also present John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men” on Monday. Admission is free and the performance begins at 7 p.m.

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