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Program fosters education through theater

BY Edward Meisel • August 6, 2009

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"Let the word go forth from this time and

place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans."

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For local actor Michael Monasterial, President John F. Kennedy's immortal 1961 inaugural address has been

an ongoing source of inspiration. Having encountered both obstacle and opportunity in his youth, Monasterial feels strongly his ties

to theater have ultimately made him a better citizen and a better human being.

Eager to share the dramatic fire that illuminated his own life, Monasterial founded "Passing the Torch through the Arts," a program

designed to foster enlightenment and education through the medium of theater.

To talk with Monasterial, two things become clear almost immediately. He sincerely loves the theater arts, and he sincerely loves the



Clockwise from top, left, Ron Morehead, Michael Monasterial, Christa Trinler and Johanna Tacadena portray all the roles in a one-act rendition of Harper Lee's classic "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Passing the Torch Through the Arts. (Donna Cavanaugh/Courtesy photo)

IF YOU GO

What: Passing the Torch Through the Arts presents "To Kill a Mockingbird"

and "Hear the Music - the Harry Belafonte Story."

ability of the theater to transcend the barriers of age, gender, culture and ethnicity and go directly to the spark of humanity that resides in each citizen of the world.

These loves directly affect the programs mounted by "Passing the Torch," which is stationed at the Howland Cultural Center on Main Street in Beacon. Its ongoing New Playwright's lab occurs every Sunday from 5:30-7:30 p.m. and is free to anyone who is interested.

"We have people who are ages 10 to 74 with a wide variety of experiences, backgrounds and talents, both professional and newcomers," Monasterial said.

The lab allows for peer discussion and critique of individual works in progress in an open and supportive environment. These discussions are then followed by prepared dramatic readings or presentations taken from classic works of varying cultures.

"Passing the Torch" will also present two one-act plays this week that reflect that same spirit of humanity and its transcendent nature. A unique 45-minute production of Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" will be followed by "Hear the Music - the Harry Belafonte Story." Both pieces highlight the issue of civil rights through uniquely personal perspectives, and consistent with the program's belief in the universality of drama, the productions were cast "blind."

Blind casting is a method of casting roles for performances with little or no regard to the outward physical appearance of the performers, but with almost sole regard to the actors' talent in communicating the essence of the written character.

"Blind casting isn't a matter of filling a gender or race quota, it's simply allowing people with gifts to freely express them without being encumbered by superficialities," Monasterial said. "People who normally couldn't perform certain roles because of their gender or physical appearance are cast strictly on talent. ... If you have the talent and are at the top of your game no part should be out of reach.

"The great thing about blind casting is that ultimately you let all your preconceptions go from your mind and enjoy the pure artistry ...

When: Thursday and Aug. 14, 8 p.m.

Where: Howland Cultural Center, 477 Main St, Beacon.

Admission: \$10; free for all students.

Information: Call 845-901-6820 or visit www.passingthetorchthroughthearts.com.

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it's truly a beautiful thing."

Edward Meisel is a freelance writer. He lives in the Hudson Valley with his wife and children where they enjoy attending a variety of theater and artistic showings. Contact him at enjoy@poughkeepsiejournal.com.

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