

WVPT gearing up for 'Storming Heaven' premiere

TO GO

"Storming Heaven: The Musical" is set for June 6-9 and June 11-16 in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the WVU Creative Arts Center. Start times are 7:30 p.m., except for Sunday performances, which begin at 2 p.m. There are also additional 2 p.m. matinees, as well as regular 7:30 p.m. performances of "Storming Heaven" on June 8 and June 15. The production is recommended for ages 12 and older. Tickets are \$25, with discounted tickets (\$15) available for children 17 and younger and for groups of more than 10. Tickets are available for purchase online through Ticketmaster, by calling 293-SHOW (7469), or at the CAC or Mountainlair box offices.



Allison McCartan, as Carrie Bishop, and Luke Halferty, as Albion Freeman are among the cast featured in "Storming Heaven: The Musical." The production, based on West Virginia author Denise Giardina's novel, kicks off West Virginia Public Theatre's summer season June 6 at the WVU Creative Arts Center.

Submitted photo

BY LINDSEY FLEMING

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As West Virginia Public Theatre gears up for its summer season, one audience member in particular is anticipating the premiere of the company's first offering "Storming Heaven: The Musical," set for June 6-9 and June 11-16 at the WVU Creative Arts Center.

"It's strange to see the characters come to life off of the page," said Denise Giardina, author of the W.D. Weatherford Award-winning novel upon which the play is based.

The Charleston resident wrote the fictionalized account of the labor strike in southern West Virginia coal mines and the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1988.

"I think it particularly resonates right now," she said. "The disadvantage the novel had is that it came out during the Reagan years, when unions were being destroyed right and left. ... People have seen the other side and the importance of labor unions again. And the whole political situation now feels like the 1920s, when the Battle of Blair Mountain took place. It's a good time to be coming out."

The story centers on Carrie Bishop (Alison McCartan), the mine doctor's nurse and sister of the mine superintendent, who finds herself unwittingly in the middle of a love triangle with Albion Freeman (Luke Halferty), her husband and preacher to the miners, and Rondal Lloyd (Rick Mugrage), a charismatic Union organizer.

Adapted for the stage by Katy Blake and Peter Davenport (book, music and lyrics), with additional music and lyrics by country star Tracy Lawrence and Flip Anderson, the production has been in the works for about five years.

"They came to Charleston to meet with me," Giardina said of Blake and Davenport. "When they first described it as a musical, I was a little nervous because I didn't want it to have a happy ending, because it doesn't. ... I was pretty skeptical. They took me out to dinner and explained it was going to be uplifting but not happy and convinced me to try it."

Giardina is glad she did.

"They've kept me in the loop over the years, and there have been changes. They've asked me

questions and sent me scripts. I'm really pleased with it."

It helps, Giardina said, that she has a background in theater. She's been an assistant director as well as acted in a few plays and has also written one.

"I understood that you can't turn a 300-page novel into two hours without losing a lot. ... They had to put some characters on the chopping block."

However, the spirit of the story remains intact.

"They kept the integrity of it," she said.

And while the story may not immediately seem tailor made to become a musical, it makes sense to Giardina.

"I listened to a lot of old-time mountain music and referred to it in the text. So, it's not such a crazy idea."