

'Storming Heaven'

WVPT hosts staged reading of musical based on W.Va. novel



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

Peter Davenport (above, from left), Emily Otto, Tracy Lawrence, Katy Blake, Cassie Hackbart and Rick Mugrage during rehearsal of "Storming Heaven" on Tuesday at the Creative Arts Center.

A STAGED READING OF "STORMING HEAVEN: THE MUSICAL" is set for 7:30 p.m. Saturday in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the WVU Creative Arts Center. This is a non-ticketed free event.

BY LINDSEY FLEMING

The Dominion Post

Katy Blake recalls that she and Peter Davenport met while playing husband and wife "in just a terrible show."

"But it's New York and we got a paycheck and stayed friends because of it."

Now, the pair are linked through another show, "Storming Heaven: The Musical." But this time, they're the creators.

"Really, this is our baby. We call each other our writing spouses," said Blake, adding that their actual spouses are understanding of the long hours spent developing what they hope will be a Broadway-bound production.

"Most musicals that get to a Broadway stage, it's typically a five to eight year process, because of the logistics involved," she said. "We're in our sixth year."

Based on West Virginia author Denise Giardina's W.D. Weatherford Award-winning novel, "Storming Heaven" is a



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WVPT Artistic Director Jerry McGonigle (left), who is also a WVU professor, oversees the rehearsal for "Storming Heaven."

fictionalized account of the labor strike in southern West Virginia coal mines and the Battle of Blair Mountain.

The musical is set in a 1920s West Virginia town. Within this tumultuous and precarious world, the audience is introduced to five people whose lives are irrevocably changed by the events around them.

At the core is Carrie Bishop, 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, her husband and preacher to the miners, and Rondal Lloyd, a charismatic Union organizer.

West Virginia Public Theatre (WVPT) is collaborating with the New York City composers, country music artist Tracy Lawrence and Giardina to develop the show.

Their work will conclude with a staged reading of the musical at

7:30 p.m. Saturday in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the WVU Creative Arts Center.

The workshop is directed by WVPT Artistic Director Jerry McGonigle, music directed by Emily Otto, and features performances by a mixture of area talent and guest artists from New York City and Pittsburgh.

"This is our third reading workshop," Blake said. "We're

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ready to be a full production. It would be wonderful to do at West Virginia Public Theatre, to be able to bring a truly West Virginia story to the theater.

"Denise is very much a West Virginian. She loves the state, and she makes that clear in the books she writes. She was thrilled that we were going to be here."

Blake added that the author, who is originally from Bluefield, attended a previous reading in New York and has given the musical her blessing.

"Carrie's story differs somewhat [from the novel's], but we've stayed true to the themes Denise is writing about," she said. "We're so appreciative of her support."

Blake, who grew up in Virginia and attended The University of Virginia, said she's known children of coal miners and has always been interested in exploring the coal industry.

"When I decided I wanted to do this, I did research and came across Denise's book," she said. "I'd read a bunch of other material, but this book was singing to me. I could hear the songs as I was reading it."

She also had an artist in mind to help create what would become the 13 original songs included in the musical.

"When I was in Nashville, my mentor there worked with Tracy Lawrence and said he loved theater and would be a person I should consider reaching out to."

So, she did and Lawrence, as well as his frequent collaborator Flip Anderson, happily hopped on board.

"I love the creative aspect of it," Lawrence said. "And I like theater because I like things that are well put together and thought out."

In his career, the country singer, songwriter and producer has sold 13 million albums, has had 22 songs on the Billboard Top 10 charts and 18 No. 1 songs. He has also garnered numerous CMA and ACM awards and nominations, as well as a

Grammy nomination.

"When you write a commercial song, you're painting a pretty clear picture of a scene," he said. "You want to get as much visual imagery in that three and half minutes as possible. With theater, you're really trying to write to that particular moment in time and enhancing the character."

Lawrence said the bulk of the script was complete, before the songs were written.

"We would talk about a scene, put ourselves in that place and figure out what the song needed to say and what we wanted to get across to the crowd. It was very diverse. Some songs are almost tribal, they're very dark. We wanted to set the mood of people slaving in those mines. We also have an uplifting tone with some songs, like when Carrie meets the preacher. It's really powerful. It has a great flow."

"This is not a jukebox musical," Blake said. "This is an old-fashioned, big, dramatic musical theater show. It's old school. And it should be."

She added that she's grateful to get input on the show's sound from Travis Stimeling, an associate professor of musicology at WVU. He's also the director of the WVU Bluegrass Band, WVU Old-Time Band, and a scholar of commercial country and Appalachian traditional music.

"He knows his stuff," Blake said. "He's jumping in with us and bringing a couple of his favorite musicians along, so we'll have this authentic sound Saturday. That's another step for us musically, his input."

She said that each reading has helped "Storming Heaven" evolve.

"We're not precious about the show," she said, referring to herself and Davenport. "We're doing what we do to serve the story. And each time we do this, it gets close and closer to being finished. With this reading Saturday, we want to let people know we're here, and we're ready to take the next step to get to a larger audience."