

'Storming Heaven: The Musical' debuts

TO GO

"Storming Heaven: The Musical" is set for today-Sunday and Tuesday-June 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" Saturday 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.

BY LINDSEY FLEMING

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Getting a play all the way to a Broadway stage is no small feat.

Katy Blake and Peter Davenport will be another step closer when "Storming Heaven" debuts today as the kick-off to West Virginia Public Theatre's summer season.

And while the creators of the musical — based on West Virginia author Denise Giardina's book of the same name, with additional music and lyrics by country star Tracy Lawrence and Flip Anderson — said they're pinching themselves

over the impending production's world premiere, they're equally thrilled that the story is being told in the way they've envisioned since its inception.

"We're so grateful to have had the opportunity to connect with WVPT and Jerry," Davenport said, referring to the nonprofit's artistic director Jerry McGonigle, who is also directing "Storming Heaven."

"A few years ago, we were talking about moving this piece forward, and we were always very sure it needed to be done in the most authentic way possible," Blake added. "We



Submitted photo

Union organizer Rondal Lloyd (Rick Mugrage), Carrie Bishop (Allison McCartan) and Albion Freeman (Luke Halferty) share a scene in "Storming Heaven: The Musical."

researched theaters across West Virginia and came across the theater and Jerry. And it turns out that he's a big fan of Denise and the novel. ... Years later, it's fallen into place and it feels like the association couldn't be more fortuitous."

McGonigle and Giardina worked together prior to the project, on a film which aired on West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

"One of Denise's concerns, because her book had been

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optioned several times for film and TV is that it not turn into hillbilly stereotypes," Davenport said.

When pitching the idea of the musical to her, Davenport and Blake promised that would not be the case, and McGonigle's involvement is yet more assurance that the heart of the story will remain intact.

"It's so serendipitous," the author said during an earlier interview with the paper.

In the handful of years it's taken to shape the musi-

cal, Blake and Davenport have worked closely with the Charleston writer — seeking input and keeping her apprised of their progress.

"When we first started writing, we were more faithful to the entire story," Blake said. "We sat down for a first read-through with a friend of mine who's a dramaturge, and he told us that what we had at the time was too broad. That gave us permission to go back to the drawing board and that was a critical point."

It was then that they made the decision to put the spotlight on Carrie Bishop (Alison McCartan),

the mine doctor's nurse and sister of the mine superintendent, who finds herself in the middle of a love triangle with Albion Freeman (Luke Halferty), her husband and preacher to the miners, and Union organizer Rondal Lloyd (Rick Mugrage).

The idea is to show the parallels between Carrie's journey of self-discovery — a woman at the turn of the 20th century struggling to find her own identity and power — with that of the miners fighting for basic human rights.

"We're focusing on the journey of a strong female character who was ahead of

her time and what her path is. And it just happens that it really resonates right now," Blake said, citing the Me Too movement.

Davenport also notes that many of the miners' struggles remain evergreen.

"We had a miner come and speak with the company. He and his wife, they're not from West Virginia, but he works in the coal belt here and they're basically saying that [owners] there created working conditions that no one wanted to work in so that they could hire non-union workers. And that's exactly what the show is about."

Early on, Giardina gave the pair her blessing, and audiences have also approved.

In fact, it was after a sold-out staged reading in January that McGonigle and the WVPT board approached the creators with the offer to add "Storming Heaven" to the summer schedule.

"The staff and resources here are incredible," Blake said. "It's really a world-class facility with a lot of talent."

"We're so excited," Davenport said. "Because we want this message and story and heart to reach as many people as possible."