GO! MAGAZINE

'Storming Heaven: The Musical' returns to Morgantown

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World premier of coal town production set to hit West Virginia Public Theatre stage

By Rachel Basinger
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With a great showing last weekend, "Storming Heaven: The Musical" returns to Morgantown, W. Va., to continue its fully-staged world premiere at the WVU Creative Arts Center tonight through June 16.

Based on the award-winning novel by Denise Giardina, "Storming Heaven" was 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 show takes place in and around a West Virginia mining town in the early 20th century, providing fictionalized — but emotionally truthful — accounts of life under the coal companies, The Battle of Blair Mountain, and the rise of the United Mine Workers of America.

The novel received numerous awards, including the 1987 W.D. Weatherford Award for the best published work about the Appalachian South, and is regularly used in curriculum in schools throughout West Virginia and the nation.

"I have been thrilled to see Storming Heaven come to life on the stage," said author Denise Giardina in a recent press release. "I am especially gratified that the writers and composers understand the themes at the heart of the novel, and also have shown great respect and appreciation for Appalachian culture."

Blake said she was a country song writer in Nashville a number of years ago and knew even back then that she wanted to write a musical.

She and Davenport have both been actors on Broadway tours and when she finally came to the decision that she wanted to write a musical, she got in contact with one of her mentors in Nashville who just happened to be working with Tracy Lawrence at the time.

"She said he might be interested in doing some work on the musical, so a couple of months later we went to Nashville," said Blake. "We sat down with Tracy (Lawrence) and Flip Anderson, and 45 minutes, later we had written a song."

Blake knew that she wanted to write a musical set in Appalachia, which had meaning for her. She went to school at Virginia Tech University in the Blue Ridge Mountains and wanted to write about coal mining.

"I thought West Virginia was a beautiful state," she said, adding that she had vacationed in the state in her younger years.

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JERRY MCGONIGLE

From left are Luke Halferty (Albion Freeman), Alison McCartan (Carrie Bishop). ON THE COVER: From left are Rick Mugrage (Rondal Lloyd), Luke Halferty (Albion Freeman), Alison McCartan (Carrie Bishop).

"I have been thrilled to see Storming Heaven come to life on the stage."

— Denise Giardina, author of "Storming Heaven"

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Shortly after, Blake asked Davenport if he would be interested in helping to write the musical.

With all the players in place, the only thing left was deciding what to write.

"A friend of mine told me about 'Storming Heaven' and Peter and I read it and afterwards, we looked at each other and knew this was the musical," Blake said.

"It sang to us," said Davenport. "It was so full of heart and had such specificity to it and the characters were perfect to draw upon for the story. There was lots of opportunity for us to pluck the detailed information we wanted to tell."

It has been six and a half years since Davenport came on board, and they are excited that the show has finally hit the stage.

"We have been working really, really hard and I'm most proud that we are actually here," said Blake. "It's a story we think the audience needed to see."

The story line 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.

Carrie's journey of self-discovery — a woman at the turn of the twentieth century struggling to find her own identity and power — parallels the miners' struggle for basic human rights.

McCartan, who is from Minnesota but currently living in New York, said she's never been part of a world-premiere show before and said she feels very fortunate to be part of this show's journey.

"I'm excited to be doing this show locally, here in West Virginia, where those in the audience have experienced some of what the show is about, but on the flip side, because they audience knows this life, we really have to make sure that everything we do is built in authenticity," said McCartan.

She added that she thinks the audience will really respond well to the story as well as the authentic bluegrass-style music.

"I'm excited to get this going," she said. "It's a really special story."

All performances will take place in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre (WVU Creative Arts Center), at 7:30 p.m., except for the Sunday performance, which begin at 2 p.m. There is also an additional 2 p.m. matinee (as well as regular 7:30 p.m. evening performance) on June 15.

Tickets are $25, with discounted tickets ($15) available for children 17 and under and for groups of 10 or more. They are available online through Ticketmaster, by calling 304-293-SHOW, or at the box office. For more information, visit www.wvpubliictheatre.org.