

Community

Force of Nature at the Warner

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By Jack Coraggio

It's a frank story born of despair and frustration, blueprinted in three distinguishable parts. The play "Who You Got to Believe" represents the powerful desire to hold on to one's home, and if necessary, to fight for it—even if that home, at least in physical terms, has vanished.

That's the conflict for the central character, Kathleen, an elderly woman who comes back to her hometown of New Orleans four and a half years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Despite promises of a revitalized Crescent City, her former domicile is now a lonesome set of forlorn concrete steps.

Then, like a more-timely Godot, enters Ray. An elderly man, assisting in New Orleans' reconstruction, he tries to usher Kathleen to safety, but as the story unfolds the two inadvertently discover the meaning of hope and home.

It's a tale reflecting a tragedy the size of Louisiana's Gulf Coast. Yet Torrington's Charlene George-Donaghy, who also teaches at the city's Warner Theatre Center for Arts Education, crafted it to be a very concise, yet very moving, 10 minutes.

A deeply compelling piece in the minimalist vein, it has earned the author numerous accolades, awards, staged readings and a publishing commitment in an acclaimed upcoming compilation by Applause Books.

"It's my first post-Katrina play, and I wanted to speak to people of the city, show how it affected them without just stating the facts," described Ms. George-Donaghy, the local girl who empathizes so deeply with the forgotten citizens of New Orleans, her adopted city. "Now it will be published in 'The Best American Short Plays, 2010-2011' next year. And that's a big one."

That is a big one, but not so big that it overshadows the play's award-winning status for a 10-minute play from the prestigious Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Region One. The Kennedy Center's Robert Boles, also of the University of New Haven Theatre Program, called it "truly one of the best examples of a ten-minute I've read."

The Kennedy Center award, now that's a big one, but not so big that it overshadows any of the half-dozen or so accomplishments bestowed upon "Who You Got to Believe."

Then again, none of it overshadows the local playwright, an exceedingly gifted author whose star is rising meteorically.

Upon seeing the New Orleans-based short play, a New York City theater group commissioned her to write one about the human impact of our down economy. And her latest work, the full-length "The Quadroon and the Dove," is met with some great expectations. The Boston Playwrights Theatre just had a staged reading, and if fleshed out with some dedicated actors and directors, who knows, maybe Broadway.

"It's been a good year," said Ms. George-Donaghy, her satisfaction well deserved.

She admits that her "hope as a playwright is to be the next Theresa Rebeck," a woman who has penned about 40 plays in the past 30 years. She'll have to work for it, but charged by an intense love for the multifaceted craft, Ms. George-Donaghy is willing.

She doesn't just write and promote plays, but mines the whole process, from cultivation to curtain call. For years she's taught writing at the

Warner Theatre, essentially reshaping the curriculum of the entire program. She serves as stage manager when possible, as in last year's outstanding adaptation of Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," performed at the Warner's adjacent Nancy Marine Studio Theatre.

Her determination is inspiring, considering that she's a breast cancer survivor.

In 1995, Ms. George-Donaghy, only in her early 30s, was diagnosed with the disease. Tenaciously, she defeated it. A year later, inspired by Anne Rice's "Interview with a Vampire," which she read during the battle, she and friends took a trip to New Orleans.

Spiritually, she stayed there. It's her muse. She now owns a time-share in the French Quarter, a place from which she extracts much inspiration—including for a story that intermingles free people of color, slaves and Creoles in 1840 New Orleans. That's the premise for "The Quadroon and the Dove."

Clarice, a free woman of color is a mistress to Lucien, a wealthy French Creole. She obsesses and schemes to have Lucien bound to her alone in a life away from repressive laws. As the Quadroon Ball approaches, she sees her life spinning out of control as Lucien's desires for new love and family intertwine with a growing slave uprising.

It sounds like a hit, and one would think Ms. George-Donaghy's passion is instinctual. It is.

She is truly a Torrington native—in the 1940s her father was an usher at the Warner—so familial involvement in the local arts, particularly as it pertains to the Art Deco theater, is intrinsic. And as a child ("I was the little kid in the neighborhood who would write skits and stories") it had a measurable impact.

She started college later in life, in her 40s, and it didn't take long for her matriculation to take shape. The thought of studying computers repelled her. She likes history but not so much to make it an academic concentration.

"That's when I really started concentrating on my writing, and I'm a theater geek, so it was a natural progression for me," said Ms. George-Donaghy, who just recently earned an MFA in creative writing from Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass. "I love telling stories as a play, and to see how the audience reacts."

Isabel Carrington, the director of education for the Warner Theatre, feels privileged to have such an avid devotee of the craft teach at the Center for Arts Education. The director even credits Ms. George-Donaghy with broadening the program, making the public more aware of all things theater, things such as writing and stage management.

"Charlene has created and cultivated the entire creative writing class department; she created curriculum and served as a real advocate for the center," said Ms. Carrington. "The response has been great. We're getting to the point where the public understands we are about more than just visual arts."

It's her personality, said Ms. Carrington, that has made Ms. George-Donaghy so popular at the Warner. Indeed, the playwright is anthropomorphic sunshine. Even in a telephone conversation one can feel the warmth of her sunny disposition radiate through.

According to Ms. Carrington, the teacher/writer "has a permanent home" at the Warner Theatre. And that's fine by Ms. George-Donaghy.

Consider "The Quadroon and the Dove," or perhaps a play yet to be written. If there was one theater that Ms. George-Donaghy could prefer see her work staged, believe it or not, it's not on 42nd Street, New York, but on Main Street in Torrington.

"I just love the old theaters, and the Warner is a jewel," she concluded. "I would love to see one of my plays there. It would be like everything coming full circle."

In the business, it might be called theater in the round.

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