

L.A. THEATRE WORKS

'RFK' docudrama coming to U-Md. has roots in Washington

The Washington Post

Sunday, January 24, 2010

By Celia Wren

As the name indicates, L.A. Theatre Works -- a company known for staging, recording and touring radio-theater versions of new and classic plays -- hails from the City of Angels. But it took a fortuitous meeting in Washington to jump-start the troupe's latest project, *RFK: The Journey to Justice*, a docudrama landing Friday at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center.

"It's a very Washington story," said Chevy Chase resident Murray Horwitz, who co-wrote the play with California-based writer Jonathan Estrin.

One evening in June 2008, Horwitz -- then director of the American Film Institute's Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring -- found himself at the Newseum, where the 1968 Oscar-winning short film *Robert Kennedy Remembered* was being screened as part of the Silverdocs festival. While standing in line for a glass of wine, Horwitz ran into Susan Albert Loewenberg, L.A. Theatre Works' producing director.

The two were old friends, having met years before while forging careers in arts and journalism. Horwitz originated and co-wrote the 1978 Broadway blockbuster "Ain't Misbehavin'," and, during a Peabody Award-winning stint at NPR, started the comedy news quiz "Wait Wait . . . Don't Tell Me!" Loewenberg founded L.A. Theatre Works in the 1970s, and she hosts "The Play's the Thing," a syndicated show that airs on public and satellite radio.

In summer 2008, Loewenberg was seeking a writer for a commissioned project that had been jointly proposed by the Clarice Smith Center and other university performing arts programs (including the Modlin Center for the Arts at the University of Richmond). The piece was to be a history-based work in the vein of L.A. Theatre Works' *Top Secret: The Battle for the Pentagon Papers* and *The Great Tennessee Monkey Trial*.

Loewenberg wanted the new play to deal with Robert F. Kennedy. In particular, she envisaged chronicling his increasing interest in civil rights issues in the last eight years of his life -- from his tenure as campaign manager for John F. Kennedy's presidential run, his battles as JFK's attorney general and his own 1968 presidential campaign.

In 1968, Loewenberg was a graduate student in history at the University of California, Los Angeles. For a seminar on biography, she was writing a paper on Robert Kennedy's transition from sibling sidekick to political star. On June 5, she remembers vividly, she was polishing off her paper in front of the TV, which was tuned to RFK's California Democratic primary victory party. As she watched, the candidate was shot by Sirhan Sirhan.

Four decades later, her company had a chance to pay tribute to the fallen statesman. After hearing the topic for the planned play, Horwitz offered himself and Estrin, a TV and film writer and producer who is president of the Los Angeles-based Constitutional Rights Foundation.

Neither Horwitz nor Estrin was overly steeped in Bobby Kennedy lore -- they were in the high school- and college-age range during his final years -- but they soon came to agree with Loewenberg's conviction that RFK's commitment to social justice had rocketed upward during his final decade.

"In 1960, neither [RFK] nor his brother were very involved with civil rights," Loewenberg said. "They thought it was an important issue, but also something that had to be managed politically, because it was fraught with danger for them with regard to the Southern Democrats, whom they did not want to alienate. They were very focused on getting John elected. Civil rights was a problem."

But as time went on, RFK evidently shed his reservations. Among other acts, as attorney general, he worked to enforce the

integration of the University of Mississippi and secure the safety of the Freedom Riders, and he teamed up on the effort that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Later, as a senator from New York, he strove to combat poverty and disenfranchisement. His fervor for such matters fed into his presidential campaign.

"By the end, he was a true believer," Horwitz said. "It was not just politics."

After a research period that included interviewing primary sources, such as onetime RFK aide John Seigenthaler, Horwitz and Estrin crafted a drama that incorporates quotations from Robert Kennedy's speeches and reported conversations.

Interpreting the script in the touring production are nine actors, including Henry Clarke in the title role. Film and TV actor Kevin Daniels portrays the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose initially strained relationship with Kennedy furnishes one of the play's key dynamics.

Like *Top Secret*, which starts an off-Broadway run next month, *RFK* features an old-fashioned radio-theater format: minimal blocking, actors with scripts in hand and an onstage foley artist generating sound effects (such as gavels banging in Senate hearing rooms, drinks being poured at the Waldorf Astoria and a metal pipe thudding on Seigenthaler's head during unrest over the Freedom Riders episode).

But if the performance style is flavorfully old-school, the content brims with timely themes. While emphasizing that they have aimed to steer the play away from "hagiography," Horwitz and Estrin said that they've been struck by Robert Kennedy's success in fusing idealism with pragmatism -- an accomplishment that seems remarkable, they said, in view of the current partisan landscape.

"Idealism and politics were able to exist together and were a kind of winning combination" in the 1960s, Horwitz said. Is that equation impossible today? "I don't know," he said, but he mentioned the disillusionment that some voters have experienced as the sentiments stirred up by Barack Obama's presidential run have yielded to the realities of governing.

Estrin sounded a related note. "We tend to forget that [Robert and John Kennedy] were very pragmatic politicians who understood how you got things done," he said. "It wasn't just about standing on the moral high ground."

Too often, Estrin said, the public tends "to fall in love with a leader -- and then we become completely disappointed when they actually have to act like a politician" and seek compromises. We'd prefer the leader to "just wave [a] magic wand and make us all feel better."

But "RFK" won't resonate only for politics junkies and the like -- at least not in the opinion of Paul Brohan, associate director of artistic initiatives at the Clarice Smith Center. The play's message, he said, is far broader, dealing as it does with "issues of race, of conscience, of personal responsibility, of commitment to community and nation before self."

"These are all things that we struggle with in 2010."

