


# DTC's 'Exonerated' seeks to focus on justice

Betsy Price, The News Journal 12:07 a.m. EST February 28, 2014



(Photo: Matt Urban)

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Smashing the invisible fourth wall of the stage, characters in the Delaware Theatre Company's "The Exonerated" speak directly to the audience about waiting for execution on death row.

All six of the inmates will escape the final penalty as evidence or confessions prove they were not guilty of the crime for which they were convicted. In one case that confession comes just nine days before the person is set for the gas chamber.

All of the stories are true, and having the actors speak directly to the audience is a way of emphasizing their struggles, says director David Bradley of Philadelphia. It's his first DTC show.

"The performance becomes almost a conversation because you really feel like these actors are talking right to you," he says. It's a central element in how the play speaks to issues about justice and fairness in an immediate way, he says.

Bradley had been talking to DTC executive director Bud Martin about directing in Wilmington when the play came up. Martin, in turn, was interested in doing a contemporary piece like "The Exonerated," partly to spark community conversation, and partly to reach nontraditional audiences.

"I would tell you that a very astute board member said that the way to the heart of a black audience is not necessarily through musicals," Martin says. "I was trying to find a show that was racially charged and with a mixed cast, and a show that I hoped would attract the legal community since we have tons of lawyers in the city of Wilmington, and there's a law school at Widener and criminal justice programs at UD and Wilmington University."

DTC's production features three women and seven men; four blacks and six whites.

When Martin read the play, he was surprised it had not been performed regionally. That was a bonus for the Wilmington theater, because it meant it was a change to draw audiences from other areas.

And even better, Martin had no way of knowing that Senate Bill 19, an act to repeal the death penalty in Delaware, would be introduced in the Legislature this session. That bill narrowly passed the Senate, but has been tabled in the House. The death penalty was reinstated in Delaware in 1992, and since then, Delaware has executed 16 people.

"I was lucky it was so timely," Martin says. "Once we picked it, you couldn't turn on the TV or read the newspaper without seeing the debate over the death penalty."

Ultimately, he says, the play feels like a documentary.

"I'm not trying to take a stance on the death penalty, but I am trying to take a stance on justice for all," Martin says.

He sent the play to Bradley, who read it and said, "I'm in."

"The six could be anybody and the play makes that point," Bradley says. "One of them says, 'If it could happen to me, man, it could happen to anyone.' Any time you have theater like that, it makes it feel very present and very connected to an audience."

Bradley and Martin are both interested in how a theater can stimulate dialogue, and how it can be another avenue into complicated and emotional issues.

"We have a lot of polarized conversations around civic or political themes," Bradley says. "I think art can open up a way into that conversation that makes it less polarized. Really, you're encouraged to connect with somebody else's story and once you're connected to someone else's story, you're opening yourself up to a different point of view."

"The Exonerated" was written by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen after interviewing 40 former death row prisoners. The cast and crew had a lot of written material, including books by some of the characters, and video to watch to prepare for the show, from arrest to trial to freedom.

It touches a lot of nerves.

"I had to break up a post-show discussion the night of the first production because of how heated the discussion got," Martin says. "It's really exciting when you can do a show that provokes this kind of debate and this kind of discussion. It's the kind of thing a theater should do."

Bradley hopes people will be thinking about justice as they leave the theater.

"I hope what people will think about is what's the best way to bring justice fairly to everyone in this country, regardless of economic circumstances, regardless of race, regardless of where they lived," he says. "I think that's what this play invites us to do, to think about what it requires of all of us to live up to our great national creed of equality, and fairness, and justice."

"Good theater is meant to do one of three things: first, move you emotionally; second, move you to talk about how you feel; third, move you to take an action about how you feel."

"Delaware Theatre Company is proud to be a place where a conversation can begin about this very contested topic. There are strong beliefs and morals behind both sides of the issue; and the fact that a piece of theater can provide the catalyst for discussion has made a succinct impact on those who have joined us so far."

Contact Betsy Price at (302) 324-2884 or [beprice@delawareonline.com](mailto:beprice@delawareonline.com).

IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** "The Exonerated"

**WHERE:** Delaware Theatre Company, 200 Water St., Wilmington

**WHEN:** 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday, March 7 and 8; 2 p.m. Saturday, Sunday, Wednesday, March 8 and 9; 7 p.m. March 6.

**TICKETS:** \$35-\$50

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** (302) 594-1100; [www.delaware \(http://www.delawaretheatre.org\)](http://www.delawaretheatre.org)

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