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The music did not die

Kevin Ramsey explores life after Hurricane Katrina with Delaware Theatre Company

By *RYAN CORMIER*
The News Journal

WILMINGTON -- For New Orleans native Kevin Ramsey, Hurricane Katrina was personal. The storm destroyed the home his father built.

His 92-year-old mother moved back to town earlier this month, more than four years after the storm ravaged the city, taking more than 1,800 lives with it.

Given Ramsey's background as an actor, playwright, choreographer, singer and dancer, it should not come as a surprise that his fifth production with the Delaware Theatre Company revolves around New Orleans -- its culture, music and, of course, the hurricane.

"Fire on the Bayou," which runs through Nov. 1, kicks off the 31st season for the DTC, filled with the music that is part of the Crescent City's lifeblood.

The story immerses the audience in the world of fictional Katrina survivors, centered around Congo Square, an area in the city's Treme neighborhood, north of the French Quarter. The story is told through a band of angels sent to rescue a pair of suddenly homeless children. They share heartbreaking and resilient tales of those who have struggled and faced adversity.

It all dates back to 2005, when Ramsey watched the levees break from his home in Los Angeles.

"I thought, 'Wow. What's going to happen to that music and the essence of that city?'" Ramsey says. "Because New Orleans is not just another city -- it's the people that made it what it is. It's like a gumbo -- a mixture of a lot of cultures."

Songs of the city

Just like in the city, the music helps tell the story in "Fire on the Bayou," and Ramsey enlisted a familiar face for his band: Chip Porter, who is best known as the longtime lead singer for Montana Wildaxe, a jam band that has been performing in Delaware for more than 20 years.

For Montana Wildaxe fans, it'll be a chance to see Porter in a new role, leaving the beer-soaked rock clubs behind for a few weeks.

"I never had to move while playing before," Porter says, laughing, comparing his almost-still Montana performances to the demands of "Fire."

Porter plays both guitar and bass and sings in the show, joined by keyboardist Jeremy Cohen and drummer Michael De Castro. They give zest to the show through the music of New Orleans, using songs of Dr. John, The Meters, The Neville Brothers, Allen Toussaint, Sonny Landreth and even Paul Simon, including his song "Take Me to the Mardi Gras."

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel gave the show's debut earlier this year at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater a positive review, concluding, "The Katrina stories, though an integral part of the show's meaning, drag its pace a bit. But the inclusion of the stories raises the question of how Katrina memories will be folded into the city's buoyant culture and music in a decade or two or three."

Since its Milwaukee run, the show has evolved and grown -- just as New Orleans has in recent years -- adding new characters and storylines.

A pair of Wilmington youngsters have been added to the show: P.S. du Pont Middle School student and tap dancer Paul "P.J." Pinkett, 12, and Tatiana Lofton, a singing 17-year-old Cab Calloway School of the Arts student.

Ramsey hopes the audiences in Wilmington will be moved by his work, as they were in Milwaukee.

"They were on their feet dancing in the aisles. That was deep for me," Ramsey says of his Milwaukee experience. "I wasn't excited for me. I was excited for them that they felt free enough to have that kind of release."

Ramsey's previous work with DTC includes "The Piano Lesson," last year's "No Child..." and his musical "Sam Cooke Forever Mr. Soul."

Earlier this month, "No Child" won one of the six Barrymore Awards for Excellence in Theatre it was nominated for. The awards are given each year by the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. The show also won the Ted and Stevie Wolf Award for New Approaches to Collaborations for its partnership with the Ferris School for Boys, casting students in the production.

Real-life inspiration

In "Fire," actress Jannie Jones plays Queen Marie, a fictional New Orleans police officer who tried to help rescue people in the storm but felt helpless when faced with the magnitude of the catastrophe.

For Jones, who also performed in the show's Milwaukee run, "Fire" has humanized the headlines about the tragedy.

"The stories that we tell are based on real stories that happened. To know in detail -- the man who lost his family or the children that were left homeless -- it connects you to it," she says.

Jones' soaring voice is complimented by that of Clinton Derricks-Carroll, who plays a character named Spyboy Jambalaya, a gas station worker who loses his entire family.

Ramsey told Derricks-Carroll that his character is the type of person who doesn't cry; someone with a strong will.

For Derricks-Carroll, who was close to his late father and didn't shed a tear at his funeral, it was a role he could relate to. (Derricks-Carroll says the tears for his father came spilling out about seven months later.)

"I'm able to use certain things in my own life with this role," Derricks-Carroll says of his part, which is filled with both sadness and a celebratory spirit.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Fire on the Bayou"

WHEN: Through Nov. 1

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

COST: \$35-\$49. As part of DTC's Bring-a-Teen program, every adult who purchases a ticket can receive one free ticket for a teenager. (The tickets must be purchased in person at the box office, with the teenager present, no earlier than 30 minutes prior to the performance.)

INFORMATION: www.delawaretheatre.org
