

'60/50 Project' explores MSU's civil rights history

Bridgette Redman, For the Lansing State Journal 6:04 p.m. EDT September 17, 2014



(Photo: Courtesy photo)

Educational theater often undertakes projects that aren't seen anywhere else. This can mean experimental approaches to old works or world premieres of plays that belong to a particular place and time.

Kicking off Michigan State University's Department of Theatre 2014-2015 season is a project that celebrates a specific place and time: "The 60/50 Project." Written by Rob Roznowski in collaboration with Dan Smith, it explores civil and human rights at MSU throughout its history in a series of vignettes.

The play, directed by Christina Traister, is part of the yearlong 60/50 project being sponsored by the University. It commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Brown v. The Board of Education ruling and the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act.

"We like to align ourselves with the university mission," said Kirk Domer, head of the MSU Theatre Department. "Rob said 'Let's write a play that documents MSU's role in human and civil rights.' It's been an interesting research project and celebration and not-celebration. It includes moments of turmoil and dealing with civil rights infractions. It's hitting things from both sides. When there were student uprisings or issues on campus, those are included. It's a theatrical reflection of all sides of human and civil rights issues."

Playwright Roznowski and dramaturgist Smith hit the MSU archives and researched how civil rights issues have been handled through the decades on campus. The results of their research were channeled into a series of short scenes, each telling their own story.

"There's a whole monologue of the rock that everyone paints on campus," Domer said. "Because the rock has seen everything — that was my favorite of the scenes. There is this inanimate object that has been photographed throughout time."

Smith said the play opens with a vignette called "I Was There."

"It has people who remember things very differently," Smith said. "It gets us thinking about memory and how memory works and how we all have different perspectives on history."

He said the discoveries were often fascinating and surprising. For example, Smith said, MSU was one of the very few universities during World War II who allowed Japanese-American students to attend classes. Most elsewhere were rounded up and put in internment camps.

Another scene is titled "Ghosts of the Aud" and involves fictional people reacting to real events that happened near the Auditorium building — such as Martin Luther King speaking at the Auditorium in 1965, or protests to the Vietnam War or a marriage proposal at the rock.

"There is a lot of imagining individuals who had reactions to certain events," said Smith.

Another scene looks at educational access through the eyes of gender.

"My favorite scene is 'Such Men' which has different generations of women coming to MSU and the interest of what their mothers have in what they study. It starts in 1890 and ends in 2009. The mother has a particular version of what the other should be doing and the daughter has a different idea of what she'd like to do with her college education."

The show opens Thursday with a grand opening ceremony that also inaugurates the new outdoor space that will become the permanent home of Summer Circle. Domer said it will be hosted by Lou Anna Simon and the Board of Trustees. The theater department will perform a scene from this summer's children's show "The Summer Circle" and then have a reception.

The 60/50 Project is being performed in The Studio 60 project, which seats about 80 people.

Smith said the scenic design, created by Ceejay Libut, includes the iconic windows of the Auditorium and puts the rock on stage as a recognizable campus icon. They also will do projections of photos drawn from the MSU archives, including such things as a class of women graduating in 1907, a class that includes an African-American woman. Hernando Claros is the projections and media designer.

Since each of the actors must move through a number of different time periods and scenes, Costumer Rainie Jaing created a base costume and then used the color palette of green and white to emphasize the Spartan identity.

A year in the making and rich in research, "The 60/50 Project" is a play that is very much about MSU and celebrates this particular anniversary.

"I think it is pretty much a play for this particular moment, though some of the scenes could be taken out of context and put in a different venue," Smith said, "but the play is very much written for the 60/50 project and for this moment. Thematically what these characters go through as citizens to the MSU community is similar to Americans in any community over the history of time in the 20th century and history of changes around segregation and inclusion."

The 60/50 Theatre Project

- **When:** Thursday-Sunday, Sept. 24-Sept. 28, 7:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays, 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. on Sundays.
- **Where:** The Studio 60 Theatre, MSU Auditorium
- **Ticket prices:** \$10, available at www.whartoncenter.com (<http://www.whartoncenter.com/>) or (800) WHARTON.
- **Extras:** Post-show discussion Thursday following the performances, and a director pre-show discussion at 1:15 p.m. Sunday.

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