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## Review: Song of a Man Coming Through

Tyler Gillespie Nov 16, 2015 - 1:30 pm



PHOTO BY JOHN BARROIS



Earnest Knighton Jr. killed a man during a robbery in the early 1980s and was sentenced to death. While on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a team of lawyers, arguing that if he wasn't black, he wouldn't have received the death penalty. *Song of a Man Coming Through*, currently receiving its premiere from Southern Rep at the First Grace United Methodist Church, recounts Knighton's time on death row.

*Song of a Man Coming Through* is co-written by Andrew Doss and his father Joe Morris Doss, who is a character in the drama. Lawyer-turned-minister Joe (Mike Harkins), lawyer Julian Murray (John Neisler) and paralegal Catherine Brame (Cecile Monteyne) pursue the long and arduous appeals process to overturn Knighton's (Robert Diago DoQui) sentence. They argue the system is racist, and if Knighton was white, he would have been sentenced to life in prison. DoQui is a powerful actor, and he plays Knighton with confidence, even when the situation looks hopeless.

The audience surrounds the stage, which is minimally appointed with stacks of long, wooden crates, and the openness creates the sense of a communal experience. Aimee Hayes' direction is excellent, and powerful hymns, led by Brittney James and Barbara Shorts, punctuate scenes.

The show's focus in the second act is unbalanced. Toward the end, Knighton tells Doss to help "tell his story," which ostensibly is the show's purpose. Knighton's story comes through a series of interviews with his lawyers. During these sessions, the lawyers seem to cross-examine him, probing for important information. But instead of adding insight into Knighton's life, these scenes ultimately show more about the lawyers and their growing compassion for Knighton.

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We see Knighton as a charming and thoughtful man when he's talking to an inmate played by Lance E. Nichols (TV's *Treme*). This character gives Knighton perspective and cautions him to be wary of the lawyers' intentions. The two men bond and constantly debate the best stance for a baseball player to use in the batter's box, a metaphor for their imprisonment. Nichols gives an extremely funny and dynamic performance full of gripping emotion and insight.

Although there were issues with the play's focus, the show's end is powerful and moving in both its emotional and religious context. The narrative raises many important points, such as the failings of mass incarceration, the ethics of capital punishment and the history of biased sentencing of black criminals. The acting and direction in *Song of a Man Coming Through* are outstanding, and this production should initiate some tough conversations.



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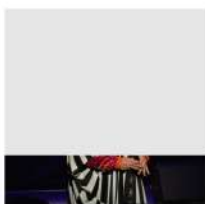
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