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NEW ORLEANS ART AND STAGE NEWS

Southern Rep's death penalty drama brings humanity, persuasive argument to challenging issue

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'Song of a Man Coming Through.'

Robert Diago DoQui, right, plays convicted murderer Earnest Knighton Jr. in 'Song of a Man Coming Through.' Lance Nichols, left, is a fellow inmate who offers the Death Row prisoner advice, wisdom and humor. (John B. Barrois)

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By Theodore P. Mahne, NOLA.com The Times-Picayune

Few political or moral issues divide this country as much as the death penalty; the simple fact that Southern Rep has tackled the issue with its newest drama will upset and even anger some.

The very nature of the controversies surrounding the topic will lead some to declare that the company is engaging in little more than political agitprop dressed up as theater.

Nevertheless, by presenting the world premiere of "Song of a Man Coming Through," Southern Rep has created one of the most reasonably argued and convincing cases against state-sponsored execution, while also revealing the methodical depersonalization that allows advocates of the death penalty to readily declare another human being as unworthy of living.

"Song of a Man Coming Through" tells the story of Earnest Knighton Jr., a black man in rural Louisiana who got caught up in drugs and crime from his youth. Eventually, while high on speed, he was involved in a Bossier City armed robbery in 1981, in which a victim was shot and killed. (Knighton, who admitted his guilt in the robbery, said the shooting was inadvertent.)

SONG OF A MAN COMING THROUGH

- What: Southern Rep presents the true story of convicted Louisiana murderer Earnest Knighton Jr., and the priest, lawyer and paralegal who reluctantly become his greatest advocates. The Episcopal priest, Joe Morris Doss, and his son, Andrew Doss, wrote the play. Aimee Hayes directs the cast, which includes Robert Diago DoQui, Lance Nichols, Mike Harkins, John Neisler, Cecile Monteyne, and others.
Where: First Grace United Methodist Church, 3401 Canal St.
When: Performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, and at 6 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 21.
Admission: \$20-\$40. For information, call 504.522.6545, or visit the company's website.

Brought to trial, Knighton's court-appointed lawyer was an ill and overworked public defender. A jury convicted him and he was sentenced to death. Despite a legion of appeals on a variety of grounds, which drew national attention, Knighton was electrocuted on Oct. 30, 1984.

"Song of a Man Coming Through" was written by one of Knighton's appellate attorneys, Joe Morris Doss, and his son, Andrew Doss. Having earned his law degree, the elder Doss later became an Episcopal priest. A significant part of his ministry has centered on efforts to end the death penalty. While a member of the clergy, he was entreated to serve as a co-counsel through the appeals process by his friend, attorney Julian Murray.



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The drama of the play is tense throughout as the pair of lawyers and their paralegal work through the maddeningly tedious process in which a man's life hangs in the balance. Keeping their eye on the legal ball, ironically, even the lawyers, at first, tend to depersonalize Knighton. "We're just your lawyers," he is repeatedly told. The job is to spare his life, nothing more - not to befriend him, not to get to know him beyond the facts of the case.

It is as much the struggle of that dehumanization that gives the story its vitality, as well as its title. Unlike most prison dramas, in which no one is guilty in the pen, Knighton admits his culpability from the outset. One of the surest signs of his rehabilitation is that he is a man who wants that guilt recognized and desires absolution for his crime.

The strongest argument that the play makes - though it failed to persuade the appellate judges in the 1980s - is to establish with distinct clarity the arbitrary and capricious nature in which the death penalty was and continues to be applied in this country. On a larger scale however, it is Knighton's cry to be recognized as a man who is due the dignity, whatever his crimes, to be seen as a human person.



Wisely, the script doesn't attempt to turn Knighton into an angel. In Robert Diago DoQui's performance, however, audiences will find the heart and soul of the piece. There is an impassioned simplicity presented. As the action goes on around him, he sits on Death Row. And sits and sits. Even with death looming, time is all he has, and it weighs heavily on him. DoQui's performance conveys a man who has come to a kind of peace, while seeking means of salvaging something good from his destroyed life. It is a performance that quietly catches the audience with a shattering impact by the end.

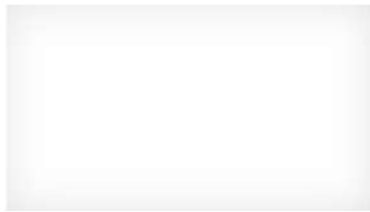


Cecile Monteyne, John Neisler, and Mike Harkins portray the legal team working to appeal the death sentence of Earnest Knighton Jr. in "Song of a Man Coming Through," now receiving its world premiere through Southern Rep. (John B. Barrois)

Playing Doss, Mike Harkins captures well the struggle of serving as legal co-counsel, focusing on the technicalities of saving Knighton's life, which often prevents him from fulfilling his calling to minister to the man's soul. It is one of the most empathetic performances I've seen Harkins give.

John Neisler plays the lead lawyer, Murray, with a patrician authority and commitment to the purity of the law. Initially reluctant to take on the appeals, not wanting the responsibility of holding Knighton's life in his hands, Neisler

gives Murray the appeal of a modern-day Atticus Finch. His passion for the case may be muted, at first, but seeing the fire in Neisler's eyes, we never doubt that it is there.



As the paralegal assisting the two lawyers, Cecile Monteyne serves as the bridge into this legal world for the audience, both as technical guide and representative of our emotional reaction to the case. She is uncertain of how close she dare allow herself to get, before the realization of just how all-encompassing such a struggle can be. Monteyne deeply expresses the life-changing affects of such an ordeal.

One of the most unexpectedly intriguing characters of the play is an unnamed fellow inmate played by Lance Nichols. As he provides bits of wisdom for Knighton, he also offers comic relief at points. As he seems to worm his way into Knighton's conscience, however, we wonder whether is he the voice of a devil demanding that Knighton just give up, or that of an angel bucking him up.

Samantha Beaulieu touches the heart as Knighton's wife, struggling to move on with her life, knowing that even if his sentence is commuted, she'll never see her husband again.

The behind-the-scenes political maneuvering that affect such cases

"vanish"



The ending of the series particular maneuverings that affect such cases are well depicted in the meetings with the original district attorney who prosecuted Knighton, along with the governor, played with conviction respectively by David Sellers and Ian Hoch. In a brief scene to show that Knighton received improper legal representation in his trial, Mark Burton is quite effective as the overwhelmed public defender who was frustratingly off his game for the capital case.



27 Insanely Cool Gadgets That Are Going to Sell out This January

As a matter of full disclosure, I note that I consider myself ardently pro-life, and that includes firm opposition to state-sponsored execution. I can note, however, a significant failing in the script that those favoring the death penalty will rush to point out - what about Knighton's victim? The actual crime is never fully or clearly addressed. The audience only learns of it in bits and pieces: the botched armed robbery, committed under the influence of drugs, in which Knighton's intent to kill is questionable, at best. We know very little, however, of the victim and are left wondering, perhaps, how these noble lawyers might respond to an encounter with his family?

While the show is talky by its very nature and has little real action, director Aimee Hayes has her cast moving in and out of the playing space in the church sanctuary with purpose. "Song of a Man Coming Through" can, however, use some sharp editing. While explaining the lengthy appeals process may be somewhat necessary, the first act gets bogged down in turgid, legal minutiae.

Despite these flaws, Hayes shows that this is a major work that demands attention. She strikes a particularly delicate balance, delivering the message of the show without letting it become mere propaganda. Indeed, also without trivializing that message, there is a strong element of showmanship here.



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Framed by choruses of gospel music, the audience is drawn in from the moment it enters. The final moments of the play bring all the emotions together in a manner that left me physically trembling. What could be a miserably depressing evening, instead, becomes a grace-filled and powerfully life-affirming experience.

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