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FESTIVE FEATURE: 'Twas The Night' For Happy Endings

THEATRESQUARED DEBUTS ROMANTIC COMEDY WITH A HEART

By [Becca Martin](#)

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When Bob Ford committed to a Christmas play, he knew whatever he wrote had to have “some substance to it.”

But as one of the founders of the regional company TheatreSquared, he also knew T2audiences would expect to have fun in addition to “thinking a little bit.”

“That was the biggest trick to deal with,” the Fayetteville playwright says. “To pose a really serious social question within a basically lighthearted romantic holiday comedy.”

“Twas the Night,” which opens this weekend at the Walton Arts Center’s Nadine Baum Studios, is everything Ford wanted it to be. The play, set at a radio station in the 1950s, has classic Christmas songs, beautiful voices, gentle humor, a sense of nostalgia about holidays gone by and two kinds of romantic entanglements, one quirkier and one more serious.

Jenny Guy, a graduate of the University of Arkansas drama program, and Jamey McGaugh, a Bentonville native and veteran of the New York theater scene, portray Izzy and Wally, lovers who are amusingly in denial.

Wally is the manager of radio station KCGW, and Izzy is his “girl Friday.” Both are about to see their lives dramatically altered when “Wally K’s Variety Hour” is sold to television.

“I feel very connected to it,” McGaugh says of the role of Wally. “He is losing something, and even though he is giving it up willingly, it’s still really tearing him up inside.

“I relate to that very intimately because I made the choice in 2001 that I wasn’t going to act anymore.

I can feel his hurt and anxiety and his wistfulness going into that last show.”

Happily for T2audiences, McGaugh and his wife moved back to Northwest Arkansas last year, and now he’s juggling his day job at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art with returning to the stage.

“Doing those two jobs back to back has been challenge,” McGaugh says with a chuckle. “I’ve never really done that before.”

It’s the principal romance, though, that gave the play the substance Ford wanted.

Joey Preston and Joanna Brown are the romantic leads in an ongoing radio serial, “City Police,” part of the variety hour that has been sold to television.

The network wants Joey, but there’s a problem with hiring Joanna. She’s African American, something radio audiences can’t see - and TV audiences aren’t ready to accept.

“You truly root for this couple to be a couple,” director Amy Herzberg, Ford’s wife, tells the actors before a recent rehearsal.

“It’s a very touching play, a charming play, and it couldn’t happen without the wonderful hearts you’re using on stage.”

The characters were the first ones Ford saw in his head when the writing process began.

"I knew right away about the love story between a black woman and a white man," he says. Nathan Riley, a New York actor who is also a graduate of the UA, came immediately to mind. Finding Angela Thomas was more difficult.

"We met her through contacts at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival," Ford explains. "She's the first actor we've hired without someone here knowing them. We're pushing the envelope on getting the best talent we can."

Having grown up in Shreveport, La., Thomas thinks the interracial relationship "is a great topic to address, not just for the 1950s. I have found the theater world the least prejudiced of any world I have been a part of."

The challenge for her, however, has been Joanna's aspirations as a singer and songwriter.

"I've never been big on singing in front of people," says Thomas, who has a master's degree in theater from Brown University. "My brother was the one who always sang. This is still a fairly recent idea to me!"

Riley, who plays Joey, says his character might be the more blindly optimistic half of the couple.

"But I think they both know the consequences and are going to take it head on," he says. "They feel like they're going to be part of a new age - and that's the bittersweet part of the play."

"It's not a heavy play," Riley reassures. "We want audiences to come out smiling and just completely charmed by a really nice piece of theater."

The actors agree working for TheatreSquared has charmed them, too. Guy, who will leave Jan. 3 to tour in a children's musical version of "The Little Engine That Could," puts it this way. "I told my folks it's artistic food for your soul."

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