

THE EXONERATED play to benefit Wisconsin Innocence Project

March 4, 2017--For immediate release--The newly formed Voices Theatre Project will present four performances of a reading of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's play THE EXONERATED as an awareness-builder and fundraiser for The Wisconsin Innocence Project. The play will be presented April 8 and 9 at the Wil-Mar Neighborhood Center, 954 Jennifer St., and April 21 and 22 at the University of Wisconsin Law School, 975 Bascom Hill. Performances on April 8, 21, and 22 are at 7:00pm, and the performance on April 9 is at 5:00pm. Tickets are free, but reservations are recommended and can be made at www.voicestheatre.com. The company will "pass the hat" for donations at each performance, with proceeds benefitting the work of the Wisconsin Innocence Project. Talkbacks will be held after each performance with local attorneys and exonerees who have benefitted from the Innocence Project's work.

Culled from interviews, letters, transcripts, case files and the public record, THE EXONERATED tells the true stories of six wrongfully convicted survivors of death row in their own words. Moving between first-person monologues and scenes set in courtrooms and prisons, the six interwoven stories paint a picture of an American criminal justice system gone horribly wrong—and of six brave souls who persevered to survive it. The play premiered off-Broadway in 2002, where it was also done simply, with actors reading the interviews directly from their scripts. A 2005 film version starred Susan Sarandon, Brian Dennehy, Danny Glover, and Aidan Quinn. Numerous celebrities appeared in the production off-Broadway in its original incarnation and a 2012 revival, including Stockard Channing, Brooke Shields, Delroy Lindo, Sara Gilbert, Richard Dreyfuss, Jill Clayburgh, and more. Both off-Broadway productions were directed by Bob Balaban.

Meghan Randolph, a veteran Madison theatre producer and director who is the founder and Executive Director of Music Theatre of Madison, created The Voices Theatre Project as an ad hoc endeavor to produce this particular play. "I discovered this remarkable work several years ago and have wanted to produce it in Madison ever since. Now, as more and more individuals in our society are being silenced, I decided a project like this was in order to use art as a means of letting the oppressed speak." Wrongful convictions are an ongoing, nonpartisan issue, she adds. "As THE EXONERATED illustrates, our justice system has repeatedly failed individuals of certain racial and economic backgrounds. We have placed our faith in our law enforcement officials at all levels, and this play conveys just how naive we are in doing so. Prosecutorial misconduct, prejudices, incompetence, governmental pressures, and pure laziness have contributed to an absurd number of people who have spent time in prison for crimes they did not commit. Their lives have been stolen from them, both while in prison and as they are forced to try to rejoin society. This play tells only six of those stories, but there are many, many more. And how it happens is absolutely staggering."

Six real-life exonerees are profiled in the play, using their own words:

- Gary Gauger (Played by James Aehl), a farmer and hippie from Illinois wrongfully convicted of murdering his elderly parents and coerced into confessing after fifteen hours of interrogation.
- Robert Earl Hayes (Played by Reginald Kellum), a horse groomer from Mississippi convicted of the murder of a white woman in spite of DNA evidence pointing to another person.
- David Keaton (Played by Max Young-Jones), a young man from Florida called to the ministry but wrongfully convicted of the murder of a police officer at age 18.
- Kerry Max Cook (Played by David Neuser), a soft-spoken Texan convicted of the rape and murder of a woman he had been intimate with in spite of extreme lack of evidence.
- Delbert Tibbs (Played by Jalen Thomas), a wise and intelligent scholar arrested in Mississippi for a crime that occurred when he wasn't even in the state.
- Sunny Jacobs (Played by Stephanie Monday), a bright-spirited hippie in Florida convicted with her husband of the shooting of a police officer and left in jail for 13 years after the actual killer confessed.

The remaining cast members play multiple roles, including spouses, cops, lawyers, friends, and relatives of the exonerees. The rest of the cast includes Brett J. Frazier, Sarah Brown Hadjimarkos, Shannon Hintz, Paul Lorentz, Ben Ruyle, Autumn Shiley, and Bart Terrell.

Future plans for The Voices Theatre Project are unknown at this time, says Randolph. "There is an oversaturation problem in the arts in Madison, and I have no desire to add to that. However, I believe it's my responsibility as an artist to combat injustice using the skills I've cultivated as an artist and arts administrator. It's the way I feel empowered to make a difference. Art opens our eyes. This particular piece is ultimately a testament to the power of the human spirit in the face of extreme adversity, which I think is also a message that resonates in our current political and social climate."

Contact: Meghan Randolph
608-347-1192
voicestheatreproject@gmail.com
