
















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VA STAGE CO: Climate Change Addressed in Rising Sea

Featured Musical Theater Stage & Film September 20, 2016



(Actress Rona Figueroa)

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By Jerome Langston

It takes a few minutes to fully acclimatize to Virginia Stage Company’s new temporary home—ODU’s modernly designed Goode Theatre, during a rehearsal break for the company’s ambitious brand new musical, *I Sing the Rising Sea*, which opens their 38th season. The aesthetics of the Goode are quite different from the historic architectural charm of the Wells, which is being renovated, and so interviewing members of the cast in this space feels initially weird and unfamiliar.

And then playwright Eric Schorr, who wrote everything in *I Sing the Rising Sea*—book, lyrics and music, begins to speak passionately about the genesis of this multi-generational story filled with music, and remarkably, the energy changes and it all begins to feel, and even look, comfortingly familiar. Eric was at VSC prior for his musical, *Frog Kiss*, and during that time, at a dinner with VSC’s then current Artistic Director, Chris Hanna, the subject of sea level rise came up as a possible basis for a show. That led the acclaimed librettist to research Norfolk’s history of being underwater, and that early research formed the basis for a proposal that led to the show’s commission back in 2013, as part of the company’s American Soil series.

The *Great Chesapeake-Potomac Hurricane* of 1933, as it’s now referred to, drowned downtown Norfolk late that August, eventually killing 18 people over the course of its line of terror that extended into Maryland, and led to millions in damages. That history connected Eric to Depression era flagpole sitting, which was apparently a popular activity at the time. During the summer of 1933 in Ocean View, a woman decided to sit on a flagpole for the entire summer. And then came that storm.

“Out of that one story about her, grew this entire play which is set in many different places—Antarctica, Japan, and also in Norfolk,” explains Eric. “I felt like this play needed to have a global component to it, so while there’s a local story embedded in it, it’s very much a global story at the same time.”

A collaboration with ODURep, and directed by VSC’s jewel, Chris Hanna, *I Sing the Rising Sea* covers time periods from 1933 here in the Ocean View neighborhood of Norfolk, all the way up to a future imagining of 2047 in Antarctica. This musical features multiple stories and character pairings, which address issues of climate change, race and racism, as well as the very survival of humanity. Many of the characters are scientists, but there are also soldiers and major historic figures featured in supporting roles, such as Harlem Renaissance poet and my literary idol, Langston Hughes. “There’s two different stories, that, if you stay to the end, you can find out how they relate to each other,” Eric adds.

One of those key stories is the remarkable and challenging fictional life lived by Granby Collins, an acclaimed African-American marine biologist whose life is chronicled from his boyhood in 1933, to the present. Actors Maurice Murphy and Tavon Olds-Sample, portray Granby respectively, at different stages in his life. Granby’s story eventually connects to the future life of his great-grandson, Granby Collins Jr., who is an astrobiologist, and is being portrayed by actor/singer Charles Browning. Granby Jr. is in Antarctica, as is Misaki, portrayed by Rona Figueroa. Misaki, who is also a scientist, has her own interesting lineage to a character played by actor Alan Ariano, who previously worked with Eric in his *Tokio Confidential* musical. “As an actress, I was looking forward to the language, and this sort of isolated, epic setting,” says Rona, who is also happy she isn’t portraying some Asian female stereotype in this show. Organic racial diversity was important to this story, Eric confirms earlier.

“The beauty of this show is the ‘Aha’ moments of how all of these characters are connected in three different time periods,” adds Alan. Indeed, the theme of interconnectedness is repeated throughout the interview and clearly refers not only to the characters, but also to the interconnectedness of humanity in its need to fight off the growing ravaging of climate change, which impacts locales around the world, including Hampton Roads.

It may be hard, though, considering the heaviness of the play’s core subject matter, to see where music would fit in, beyond sound effects. Yet in a way it makes perfect sense that this is a musical, as a serious play about the perils of sea level rise via climate change, may be harder for audiences to connect to. “It’s pretty spectacular and amazing to see a musical about science—taking something that’s very cognitive and bringing out the emotion in it,” says Charles.

As far as the music is concerned, it definitely advances the story in places, and due to the range of settings, it also adapts to the time that is being covered in a particular scene. Eric mentions a blues number and a lot of classic sounding show tunes. “There’s a little bit of everything in here.”

I Sing the Rising Sea
Virginia Stage Company
Sept. 13-Oct. 9
ODU’s Goode Theatre
Vastage.org