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By David Nicholson
Correspondent
Sep 8, 2016



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Eric Schorr, who wrote the book, music and lyrics for "I sing the Rising Sea," discusses the pace of a song with actors Maurice Murphy, left, and Rona Figueroa.



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Tavon Olds-Sample, a student at the Governor's School for the Arts, waits in the Goode Theatre at Old Dominion University as the Virginia Stage Company cast rehearses "I Sing the Rising Sea."



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Actors Betsy DiLellio, right, and Caitlin Messer, left, smile during an interview at the Goode Theatre at Old Dominion University. The Virginia Stage company is rehearsing "I Sing the Rising Sea" at the theatre, Aug. 31, 2016.



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IF YOU GO

What Virginia Stage Company's "I Sing the Rising Sea." The play is part of the Stage Company's American Soil series of new works exploring the culture and history of southeastern Virginia and is produced in collaboration with ODU Rep.

When Preview performances, 7 p.m. Tuesday and 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; opening night, 8 p.m. Sept. 16; 7 p.m. Tuesdays; 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; and 2 p.m. Sundays, through Oct. 9

Where Goode Theatre, 4601 Monarch Way, on the campus of Old Dominion University, Norfolk.

Tickets \$20-\$55.
757-627-1234.
www.vastage.org

NORFOLK

The characters in "I Sing the Rising Sea," the new Virginia Stage Company musical about an unlikely topic – the rising sea level caused by climate change, span several generations. Actress Betsy Dilello plays a woman who ages from 20 years old to 77 in this work that stretches from 1933 in Norfolk's Ocean View neighborhood to 2047 in Antarctica.

Behind the curtain, another generational evolution is taking place as aspiring young performers from The Governor's School for the Arts and Old Dominion University work alongside seasoned Equity actors in the nine-member cast.

The students are being given a dream opportunity to get the hands-on experience that doesn't come in a classroom. And, as they prepare for next week's opening, the professional actors are getting an education as well.



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Eric Schorr, who wrote the book, music and lyrics for "I Sing the Rising Sea," discusses the pace of a song with actors Maurice Murphy, left, and Rona Figueroa. [Buy Now](#)

First, let's set the scene ...

Early on in the play, GSA student Tavon Olds-Sample plays a 15-year-old African American named Granby who's working in an Ocean View amusement park in the segregated South of the 1930s. He befriends Dilello's character, a white Northerner named Rosa who works as a flagpole sitter at the park. Like the skyscraper climbers of today, flagpole sitters were part of a fad in the 1920s and '30s.

Rosa's goal is to sit atop the flagpole from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Her friendship with Granby is cemented when the teen helps to rescue her off her perch during the now-famous storm that roared through Ocean View in 1933. She becomes a mentor to the youngster, and in turn learns about segregation through him, said Eric Schorr, the show's playwright, composer and lyricist.

"She's a real feisty dame and he's a curious, sweet kid," Schorr said. "He tells her about his mother, who died in a 'Negro' hospital because she could not get a blood transfusion."

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SEARCH...

That onstage relationship mirrors the learning exchange that has taken place between the three students and six Equity actors. Though their ages aren't that far apart, their level of experience is figuratively decades. Dilello has done national tours and off-Broadway productions, while most of Olds-Sample's theatrical experience has been in high school shows.

For Dilello, working with the young performers reminds her of the beginnings of her own career.

"You remember what it was like to have everything in front of you," she said. "You see people who are so excited. This is their dream, and I can see it in myself. I remember my first show, and it changed my life."

"When we first met each other, I was really scared," Olds-Sample said in recalling the first cast get-together. "But they showed me a lot of love and compassion, and I felt I was one of them."

That comfortableness was nurtured by another actor working with Olds-Sample. Maurice Murphy plays the role of grown-up Granby. His credits include New York's Shakespeare in the Park and the original Broadway company of "Motown: the Musical."

Murphy, 33, said he believes in creating a safe space in rehearsal in which actors – young and old, seasoned and inexperienced – look out for each other and respect each other.

"It's a small cast, and like a basketball team, we really have to be together passing the ball back and forth," he said. "I look in Tavon's eyes and know he has my back."

Murphy continued: "I've been in processes before where there's been a tone of intimidation, and the work suffers. I want us to be a united front, and I want him to know if he has questions he can come to me."

In that spirit, Olds-Sample and Murphy collaborated on the kind of Southern accent Granby should have, so they could give the character continuity. Murphy let Olds-Sample take the lead in the style of Granby's accent because the teen appears onstage first.

The enthusiasm of the young actors is not lost on the Equity ensemble.

"He was completely off the book the first day of rehearsal," Murphy said about Olds-Sample's preparation, meaning he'd memorized all his lines. "I was blown away by his professionalism."

Schorr's work encourages an atmosphere of mutual respect by spanning generations and racial boundaries. The cast is made up of African Americans, Asians and Caucasians of differing ages.

Schorr first came to Hampton Roads three years ago when the Stage Company presented his musical "Frog Kiss." When then-artistic director Chris Hanna proposed a show about sea level rise, Schorr was intrigued. He returned to Norfolk and did extensive research about the region and its residents.

"When you're dealing with a contemporary topic, it helps to approach it through history," said Schorr.

"Ocean View was a segregated beach, and that interested me as a writer," he said. "So I came up with the notion of an African American kid who works at the amusement park and is doing errands for the woman on the flagpole."

Because he was creating a story on a topic of global concern, Schorr felt the need to expand the work beyond Hampton Roads. He introduces real-life characters such as Langston Hughes and Emperor Hirohito. The final scene of the play takes place in Antarctica, where the two scientists are African American and Japanese.

"It's a multigenerational epic told in intimate terms," he said. "One of the themes of the play is how we are all interconnected."