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Musical penned by police officer tells tale of hymn's writer

By DAVE LAVENDER The Herald-Dispatch

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Courtesy of the Marshall Artists Series "Amazing Grace: The Musical," a tale of romance, rebellion and redemption, the show the story of John Newton, the English slave trader who later became an Anglican priest and eventually an abolitionist, comes Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20.

Joan Marcus

HUNTINGTON — If there is anything more incredible than the timeless 1779-published hymn "Amazing Grace," it is the wretch-to-redeemed story of its author, Anglican minister John Newton, who made the unbelievable soul journey from being a slave ship captain to an outspoken abolitionist



minister.

And if there is anything more incredible than Newton's story it is the fact that the old hymn moved a Pennsylvania police officer so much, that he - against all odds and reason - took it upon himself to spend the past 17 years not only writing the complete book and music for "Amazing Grace," but miraculously getting that story onto Broadway and now on its first national tour.



Courtesy of the Marshall Artists Series The new hit "Amazing Grace: The Musical," comes to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20, as part of the Marshall Artists Series. A tale of romance, rebellion and redemption, the show follows the story of John Newton, the English slave trader who later became an Anglican priest and eventually an abolitionist.
Joan Marcus

Although "Amazing Grace; The Musical" only lasted for four months on Broadway, its creator, Christopher Smith believes the musical is out where it should be - touring the heartland on a 27-state national tour.

The tour, which began with a eight-week run at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., rolls into the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20, as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Tickets are \$64, \$70, \$81 and \$97 at the Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656, online at Ticketmaster.com and from noon to 5 p.m. at the box office in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse.

Written by Smith, with help from Arthur Giron (book), and directed by Gabriel Barre, who directed the Broadway

production, and choreographer Christopher Gattelli for the national tour, "Amazing Grace: The Musical" is a wild and true story of romance, rebellion and redemption, telling the tale of John Newton, a former slave ship owner who joins the abolition movement, and the journey that inspires the anthem of hope and redemption.



Newton - played by Michael Burrell ("Oklahoma!," "Legally Blonde," "Evita") - finds himself conflicted about whether to follow in his father's footsteps and pursue the family business, or whether to embrace the more compassionate views of his childhood sweetheart.

Newton sets out on the high seas, accompanied by his slave Thomas. When that perilous voyage finds him in his darkest hour, a moment of self-realization inspires a blazing hope in John that guides him home.

Smith, who is a Christian, said no matter what someone's beliefs are, everyone will be entertained and inspired by Newton's personal transformation to his better self.

"This is a secular show about the transformation of this one man," Smith said of the tour, which will run through May. "People try to pull us off course, and I have to say, 'Just tell the story, then people can make up their own minds' ... It is a really great show, and here in the middle of winter you need something to warm your heart up and do something meaningful. This is it."

For Smith, the power and the lure of the story of "Amazing Grace" was such that the budding singer/songwriter, whose day job was a police officer in Lower Moreland, Pennsylvania, and Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, spent about 10 years trying to write it for stage.

"I was working with young people, and I was always looking for inspirational stories as discussion starters, and I found that John Newton story. Immediately I felt this is a musical, and I went home and told my wife - who is used to me coming home with crazy ideas - and I said, 'I think this is like a "Les Mis"-type of music,' and she said, 'Yeah, you should do it,'" Smith said. "It took me about 10 years, but I did it."



As a guitarist who played by ear and who had never written music, he would literally tap one note at a time on the piano and used a computer program to transpose that into sheet music charts.

"Less than one percent of all playwrights that ever live get on Broadway, and no one writes the music and book at the same time - that is really hard to believe that anyone would have those skills," Smith said. "The only reason I did it was that I didn't know that, and I literally started off writing it that way."

While Smith found that a lot of people were confused as to why a cop would be so hung up on trying to write a Broadway play, not everyone scoffed at him. In 2007, an investor approached him about wanting to make a serious run to get the play not only into production but onto Broadway. Amazingly, more than 90 percent of the funding came from within a half hour of his house.

"I think because this happened in a miraculous way that people saw something different going on here, and, even in New York City where people are cynical because they've seen it a million times before, they got something they weren't expecting to happen and having it happen that way was icing on the cake," Smith said. "There were grown men crying on their shirt sleeves and hugging each other."

Although "Amazing Grace: The Musical," for sure has that razzle-dazzle of Broadway (the set designer did "Wicked"), and there is period-correct costuming and exceptional lighting and music, Smith said the key to the power of the story was to never let the production overwhelm or get in the way of the strength of Newton's story.

"The key for me was to never get lost in the bigness of it and to stay right with the heart of his struggle," Smith said. "We see not just Newton but that Catherine is an abolitionist that he is in love with, and he is a slave trader, and you see the conflicts with this father and that he was actually enslaved himself. We are one of the only shows in Broadway history that has depicted a slave auction, or slavery at all on stage, so the challenge was to stay at the emotional core of the story."

While "Amazing Grace" has about 20 songs in it, the best is saved for last. At every show, Smith said the audience sings loudly along with the cast, without prompting.

"We saved the lyrics until the very end, and once you get to the end and hear the lyrics there is a really surreal moment because these are worlds I have heard again and again and again and again, and they mean something very different, and the audience rises and sings with the cast at every



single performance and without prompting - they just do it, and the whole room thunders, and at the end you just want to go and hug someone."

Smith, who still works with students and who often gives inspirational talks, said he hopes his odd story about a blue-collar small-town cop who followed his faith and dreams to create this show inspires others to pull the cork off their own dreams.

"I think that warms my heart the most is that it is causing other people to embrace their own vision," Smith said. "Hey, you know what? Crazy things do happen if you believe. I was called to do something, and it took 17 years to make this come about. I think that they are encouraged to see how this happened and think about their own dreams whether they are artistic, or working with their community or changing jobs. It sort of pulls the cork off their dreams because they see me, and I am just a cop, a blue-collar guy who came out to your house if it got robbed, and if God can use me, he can use anybody."

Behind the music - "Amazing Grace"

WHAT: The national tour of "Amazing Grace: The Musical."

ABOUT: A tale of romance, rebellion and redemption, the show follows the story of John Newton, the English slave trader who later became an Anglican priest and eventually an abolitionist. He wrote many hymns, including "Amazing Grace." The musical story of redemption had a three-month run on Broadway (from July to October 2015).

WHERE: The Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, 925 4th Ave., Huntington.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20.

THE CAST: The national tour of "Amazing Grace" will feature a cast made of Michael Burrell ("Oklahoma!," "Legally Blonde," "Evita") as John Newton; Russell Rinker (Blue Man Group, "South Pacific") as Captain Newton; Isaiah Bailey ("Moses," "Dreamgirls," "Big Fish") as Thomas/Pakuteh; and Eleanor Todd ("Parade," "Big Fish") as Mary Catlett. Completing the cast will be Monique Elinor Barnes, Kelli Blackwell, Wyn Delano, Shannan E. Johnson, Jennifer Lyons Pagnard, David Sanborn, Joshua Simon, David Socolar, James Tarrant, Kanysha Williams, Jordan Campbell, Colleen Clancy, Nicki Elledge, Dion Montz Jarrett, Da'Von Moody, Briana Gibson Reeves, Morgan Scott and Andrew Tarquinio.



TICKETS: Tickets are \$97, \$81, \$70 and \$64 at Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656 or order tickets online at Ticketmaster.com. You may also visit the box office in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse from noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

SPONSORS: This performance is sponsored by Farrell White and Legg, West Virginia Lottery, West Virginia Department of Education & the Arts - Office of the Secretary, the Touma Foundation, WV Higher Education Policy Commission, Chase Bank, Intercultural Affairs at Marshall University, Marsha Slater Insurance, WTCR, B97, WSAZ, The Herald-Dispatch and Marshall University.

Coming up for the Artists Series

n John Ondrasik at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 8. The acclaimed singer and songwriter, best known by his stage name Five for Fighting, will perform on piano along with a string quartet. He burst on the scene some 15 years ago with his Grammy-nominated hit "Superman (It's Not Easy)" and has been a mainstay on mainstream radio ever since. Tickets are \$54.21, \$43.30 and \$32.39.

n The Rec Center at Marshall University presents The Banff Mountain Film Festival at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 3. The Banff Mountain Film Festival is the most prestigious mountain festival in the world. Right after the festival, held every fall in Banff, Alberta, the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour starts to travel the globe with stops in about 450 communities and 40 countries. The 2017-18 world tour features a collection of films that explore the mountain world, highlighting new landscapes and remote cultures, and exposing audiences to adventures and sports. Tickets are \$10.

n Spring International Film Festival, April 5-8, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center: Featured films include "Summer, 1993" (Spain), "Call Me By Your Name" (Italy/France), "Graduation" (Romania), "Things To Come" (France), "One Week and a Day" (Israel) and "After The Storm" (Japan). The festival is sponsored by the Cabell-Huntington Convention and Visitors Bureau. Tickets are \$10 per film.

Welcome to the discussion.

Keep it Clean. Please avoid obscene, vulgar, lewd, racist or sexually-oriented language.

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CAPS LOCK.

Don't Threaten. Threats of harming another person will not be tolerated.

Be Truthful. Don't knowingly lie about anyone or anything.

Be Nice. No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

Be Proactive. Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

Share with Us. We'd love to hear eyewitness accounts, the history behind an article.



