

On stage, a lesson in civil rights

By JIM DALLKE - jdallke@shawmedia.com
Wednesday, February 6, 2013 5:30a.m. CST

Photo: Fran Reichert, playing Rosa Parks, and Raiford Faircloth, playing her grandfather, sing on stage Tuesday during a performance of "Walk On: The Story of Rosa Parks" at the Raue Center. The play tells the story of Parks from her childhood to her decision to stay seated on a bus, resulting in the Montgomery bus boycott. Parks would have turned 100 this year. (Monica Maschak – mmaschak@shawmedia.com)



CRYSTAL LAKE – Instead of the annual Black History Month lesson in a classroom, some area elementary school students got to see civil rights played out on the theater stage Tuesday.

"Walk On: The Story of Rosa Parks," presented by Mad River Theater Works, was performed in two shows Tuesday at the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake.

The hourlong performance, open to students and the public, chronicled the life of Rosa Parks from her days as a child in Alabama to the moment she refused to give up her seat on a bus for a white man, kicking off the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Chris Westhoff, managing director of Mad River Theater Works, said the show aimed to paint a true picture of Parks and dispel myths about her life.

"I was taught in school that she was tired and she didn't feel like getting up," he said. "That's just not true. The truth is that she was an activist, and her decision to sit where she was sitting on the bus was a decided act of protest."

The performance opened with the first day of the bus boycott in Montgomery. The story then flashed back through Park's life as a student, NAACP secretary and civil rights activist at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. The play concluded with Parks refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus Dec. 1, 1955.

The theatrical history lesson, which incorporated singing and live music, provided students with a more engaging way to learn about civil rights, Westhoff said.

"You can gain a lot from anything when you see it in a different context," he said. "[The play] is driven by good stories, well-phrased expressions and strong, powerful music. All of that caters to the imagination and it brings something that might be sort of sterile and makes it tactile."

Fran Reichert has played the part of Rosa Parks since the show began in 2007 and said the role is both challenging and rewarding.

“[Rosa Parks] was a very measured and dignified person,” Reichert said between shows Tuesday. “She was very aware of herself out in the world and how she presented herself. ... I try to be very aware of the dignity of the woman, but also the indignity of what she and the other black people of their time were put through.”

Reichert said she prepared for the role by reading about Parks and listening to her voice, but she ultimately looked to her grandfather for vocal inspiration.

“Instead of using her Alabama accent, I used my grandfather’s Chattanooga accent,” said Reichert, who noted that it is slightly faster than how Parks spoke. “His accent speaks to me. It’s what I hear in my heart. It’s what I want to say out loud.”

Reichert added that it’s important for students to remember how vital the Rosa Parks story is to the history of civil rights.

“[Children] are all very aware of Martin Luther King and his legacy,” she said. “It’s nice for them to see that women were involved. That she was educated.”

“Walk On” currently is in the middle of a six-week national tour that began in Texas and will end on the East Coast.

The play was included in the Raue Center for the Arts’ Mission Imagination series, an educational outreach program designed to offer arts education to McHenry County students. The next performances will be “Martha Speaks” on Feb. 21 and “The Velveteen Rabbit” on March 15.



Copyright © 2013 Northwest Herald. All rights reserved.
Published in Crystal Lake, Illinois, USA, by Shaw Media.