

And in This Corner

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Not only did he use his new found skills to defend himself against bullies, but quickly rose through the ranks of amateur boxing rings, garnering numerous Golden Glove awards and later, at age 18, an Olympic Gold Medal.

As a young man in the Jim Crow-era South, and a descendant of slaves himself, Clay was impacted by racial inequality and the 1955 murder of Emmet Till, a young boy around his age who was brutally tortured and killed in Mississippi, and whose murderers were acquitted, which sparked national outrage.

The young Clay took his frustrations out in the ring, where only his skill as a fighter and not the color of his skin determined his merit, right at the time when athletes of color in America were breaking through to the mainstream.

Alexander hopes the play will shed light on the historic civil rights era for the younger generation and spark conversations with their parents long after the curtain drops.

"The idea of segregation and Jim Crow laws are kind of hazy [for kids] and so they get to see this on stage and kind of have it explained to them. I would love if that conversation was being had," he said.

Originally from Perry, Fla., Alexander had been inspired by Ali from an early age and even had dreams of becoming an all-star athlete himself.

"I grew up with Muhammad Ali on my wall, and Malcolm X on my wall," he said.

It was during his last month of high school, in his senior year, when Alexander got involved in an independent film in Tarpon Springs, Fla. and where he met other show business professionals who encouraged him to pursue a career in acting and the arts.

Alexander said he continues to draw inspiration from Ali's sheer confidence.

"The thing that also resonates with me is that he found his passion early and committed to it," he said. "His hard work gets overshadowed by his personality, but the man worked hard. He always had that discipline. There's a reverence and a masterful craftsmanship that comes with that. And I look up to that just being an artist and working hard."

Alexander went on to graduate from one of the highest ranking historically black colleges in the nation, Florida A&M University, as a theater major. He was later became an acting apprentice with Portland Playhouse and even started his own theater company, Confrontation Theater, which explores the realities of the African American experience through the voices of modern black theater talent in



PHOTO BY OWEN CAREY

Themes of racial injustice and childhood bullying come to life in a new Oregon Children's Theater play about a young Cassius Clay set in segregated Louisville, Ky. "And in This Corner: Cassius Clay," opens Saturday, March 3 and stars Portland actor La'Tevin Alexander.

Portland.

Jerry Foster, a prominent African American newspaper professional who has lived in Portland for the past 35 years, co-directs the Oregon Children's Theater production. He is also a board member, producer, director and actor for Passin Art, the oldest African American theater company in Oregon. Foster even met Ali at one time.

The play's boxing choreographer, Damaris Webb, is herself an accomplished athlete, having won a Golden Glove herself. She also plays Clay's mom in the play.

Webb also is co-director of the Vanport Mosaic Project, a community-driven showcase put on by

local artists, storytellers and media makers that engages the public of the history of Vanport city, a diverse and African American populated town north of Portland that was destroyed by Columbia River floodwaters in 1948.

Information about the nearly forgotten city will be on display in the theater lobby before each showing. Foote said the special exhibit is meant to emphasize that the Jim Crow-era South wasn't the only place in America with issues of race.

When Clay changed what he called his "slave name" to Muhammad Ali and converted to Islam after his first heavyweight title wins in the mid-60s, he set an example of racial pride for African Americans. He also conscientiously objected to the Vietnam War in 1966 by refusing to serve. In the process he was jailed and barred from the sport for several years, eschewing

valuable peak performance time, before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction in 1971. But even before then, as the play will showcase, Clay was already a champion for fairness as a child.

"Kids will get the message of standing up and speaking for what's right," Alexander said.

The Oregon Children's Theatre's presentation of "And in This Corner: Cassius Clay" will play Saturdays and Sundays at the Winningstad Theatre at 1111 S.W. Broadway, from March 3 through March 25 and is recommended for children 8 and up. Tickets range from \$14-\$28. More information can be found at octc.org/cassius-clay.



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