

# A note from the Director



I hope you will use this production as a first step in learning more about a man and the events of an era that shaped our country. Perhaps you might use the events depicted as a springboard for conversations that compare those circumstances with how we live now.

At first glance, this play appears simply to be about one of the greatest Americans our country has ever produced, Muhammad Ali: boxing legend, iconoclast, rebel, faithful Muslim, and humanitarian. It operates on the assumption of our national memory of the great man. The racial injustice in the 1950s and 1960s provides a context to episodes in his life that shaped the worldview of this most influential of citizens. However, this play is not really about any of those things. Our story is about a boy from Louisville, Kentucky, who learned to box because his bike was stolen. It is a story of facing adversity and fear. It is a story about learning to defend oneself. It is a story about a black boy in a white world.

I was born in Evansville, Indiana, a town on the Ohio River 123 miles downstream of Louisville, the same year Cassius Clay won the Olympic gold medal in Rome. I have always felt a connection with Muhammad Ali. I have always felt a connection with Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali. In addition to being from similar towns that shared a river, I recognized other similarities: Our parents valued the strength of a complete family, hard work, good manners, self-reliance and self-defense. At age 12, I too lost a bike to a thief, a prized birthday present, in a moment of carelessness.

Like Cassius in our story, I have distinct memories of dressing up to go downtown with my mother for bill paying and shopping. These Saturdays were always special occasions. Each month my sister and I were dressed up in our Sunday-best church clothes to navigate the shops on Main Street. As an adult, I became aware of just how special those Saturday morning shopping trips were. Those trips downtown taught us to navigate our world, to conduct ourselves in an articulate manner, to count back change. We learned social interaction, to understand commercial exchange and the value of a dollar. Each trip always ended with lunch at the diner inside the Woolworth's variety store. My sister and I had no idea that we were the beneficiaries of victories in the struggle for civil rights.

Unlike Cassius, my sister and I were completely unaware that for many African-American children the act of sitting at the counter or in a booth at Woolworth's was an act of unthinkable political activism and personal danger. For us, it was a treat for being well behaved and helpful. Thanks to our mother, we were unwitting pioneers in the right to equal access under the law to restaurants, changing rooms, and shoe stores. We had no idea of the significance of ordering our favorite grilled cheese, fries and Coke.

Reconstructing in my mind what it must have been like for my mother, I imagine the courage it must have taken for her, born in Jim Crow Kentucky in 1922, to be among the first to test the new civil rights laws with her own children. Thanks to such simple acts of citizenship by wives and mothers, our generation grew into young adults who have never doubted our right to go anywhere in this country.

In 1992, while performing Shakespeare in downtown Greensboro, I found myself in front of the very Woolworth's store where the Civil Rights Movement began in 1960. The infamous lunch counter, soon to be removed and become a permanent exhibit in the National Museum of American History, was still open. It was then that I realized the totality of what my mother, and so many wives and mothers like her, had done for us. To them, I dedicate this production.

In Memoriam,  
Lillian Mae Langley Cabell  
1922-2015