

Double-header of baseball plays at Cape May Stage

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CAPE MAY — Cape May Stage has hit a home run with its 2022 season opener “Double Play,” two one-act plays about how baseball connects people and can transform lives.

The first play, “Becoming Satchel Paige,” takes the audience on a whirlwind tour of Paige’s life on and off the mound. The second, “Happy,” is about a lifelong fan who seeks out a once-promising player benched for life by an injury, which has a healing outcome. The double-header opens May 26 at the Robert Shackleton Playhouse and runs through June 26.

Two veteran actors return to Cape May Stage in the back-to-back performances. Jesse N. Holmes, who solos in the first show, appeared in “The Whipping Man” in 2016, and Michael Basile, who co-stars with Holmes in the second piece, performed in “Chapter Two” (2018), “Barefoot in the Park” (2016), “Mistakes Were Made” (2014) and “The Woolgatherer” (2011).

Holmes plays Paige in the opening play. Playwright Dan McCormick introduces the audience to the fabled pitcher when the latter is 65 years old and retired, yet still draws crowds on the speaking and autograph circuit. Cape May Stage audiences “meet” the baseball legend at an imagined “Satchel Paige Festivity Gala Jubilee,” where, typically, he would regale fans with highlights from his 40-plus-year career.

He pauses, however, when he sees his old satchel on a bench, picks it up and runs his hand over its worn leather. Pulling an old baseball from the case, he begins to reminisce, going all the way back to his dirt-poor childhood in Mobile, Ala., in the early 1900s as the seventh of 12 offspring.

“Once he starts to unpack his life, it forces him to reflect,” McCormick explains. “All of us have satchels we carry with us through our lives.”

Holmes plays Paige from age 10 to age 65 masterfully. Whether he’s a child hustling travelers at the train station to carry their bags for a dime — thus, earning his nickname — or a phenom with a 100-mph fastball that carries his teams to victory in the Negro Baseball League and Major League Baseball, Holmes

fully inhabits his roles physically and emotionally.

Visuals and sound effects enhance his storytelling. Black-and-white photos and films are shown on a large screen behind the actor and capture the times and Paige’s trials and triumphs very effectively.

“I never had a job,” he admits. “I just played baseball.”

Roy Steinberg, producing artistic director for Cape May Stage, commissioned “Becoming Satchel Paige” last year to recognize Cape May’s own Negro Baseball League, which was formed in 1927 and competed with neighboring teams for several years. The show is a world premiere, underwritten, in part, by a grant from PNC Arts Alive and sponsored by the Mad Batter restaurant.

“Happy” is a love story: of a father and son, their passion for baseball, and their bond with a home-team hero. It’s written by Alan Zweibel, a five-time Emmy-Award-winning former writer for “Saturday Night Live” whose wit is very much in evidence in the script.

Basile and Holmes share the stage in this poignant story. Basile is the now-grown son, Donald Rappaport, whom his father nicknamed “Happy” after his idol. Grown-up Donald sells sports memorabilia now and has a deal for the man he’s named after.

Holmes plays “Happy” Haliday, Donald’s “hero,” whose once-promising baseball career ends when he gets hit in the head by a pitch and collapses. Years after the accident, Donald looks him up and arrives at his door unexpectedly. In the interim, Haliday has become the superintendent of an apartment building in Florida and has come to terms with what might have been.

Basile is outstanding as he grapples with regrets and tries to do the right thing by his idol. Holmes is superb as a proud man who has overcome crushing disappointment; built a new, fulfilling life; and, for a few minutes, gets to bask again the glow of a fan’s adoration.

“Time is precious,” Zweibel notes. “COVID has reinforced that. It’s important that we embrace the people we love while we still can.”

Cape May Stage produced an online reading of “Happy” in 2021 during the pandemic when the theater was physically closed.

“It was the most popular show



Provided

Michael Basile, left, and Jesse N. Holmes reunite over a shared love of baseball in ‘Happy,’ now playing at Cape May Stage through June 26.

we mounted that season,” Steinberg said.

Fittingly, Basile and Holmes both grew up with baseball. Basile collected baseball cards, and Holmes was a Senators fan, right up to the day his home team found a new home in Minnesota in 1960.

Works by local artist Sydney SmithJordan, honoring Cape May’s Negro Baseball League, will be on display throughout the run of the show in the lobby of the theater, alongside related materials provided by the Center for Community Arts. SmithJordan also designed the

artwork for the play’s poster and promotions. Cape May MAC featured her work at a tribute to the league this spring at the Emlen Physick Estate.

Tickets for “Double Play” are available by calling (609) 770-8311 or visiting capemaystage.org.