

# Connecticut Post

New musical, 'Indian Joe,' based on true story, explores what it means to be family



“Indian Joe” is a new musical that tells the unlikely story of a homeless Native American, Joe, and a Texas beauty queen, Liz. As the tale unfolds, emotional questions are explored, such as “What does it mean to be a family?” and “What is home?”

“It’s a moving piece in which a huge journey takes place,” said [Kim Weild](#), who is directing the show at Goodspeed Musical’s [Norma Terris Theatre](#) in Chester.

“Indian Joe” was inspired by real events in the life of Tony-nominated actress Elizabeth A. Davis, who plays Liz, the beauty queen. Weild, who was associate director of Broadway’s “Amazing Grace” and “Blithe Spirit,” among others, said that the two (Liz and Joe) even met at all is surprising. “As their friendship grew, they learned to overcome fear and prejudice, and realized there’s more to family than meets the eye,” Weild said. “Its time to be told is right now, especially given what’s happening in the world in terms of refugees.”

The book for “Indian Joe” was written by Davis and Chris Henry, artistic director of Royal Family Productions in New York City. Leading the cast with Davis is Gary Farmer, who has more than 100 film and television appearances to his name; he’s best known for playing a Native-American spiritual guide named Nobody opposite Johnny Depp in “Dead Man.”

While difficult challenges arise in “Indian Joe,” it’s ultimately a happy musical, Weild said.

Q: How did this new musical get its start?

A: Elizabeth (Davis) went to Baylor University in Waco (Texas) and Waco has a large homeless population. While she was there, she decided to start something called Bridging the Gap. Every Saturday she’d make lunches in her apartment and take the food to an underpass to serve homeless people. She met Joe and got to know him, learned that he lived under the bridge and took the initiative to help. That was over 15 years ago and it’s still going on under the bridge. Homeless people can come and get a good meal.

Q: So this weekly lunch was designed to feed people and foster unlikely friendships between students and those in poverty. But how did a musical come out of her experience?

A: She met Joe and they changed each other's lives. At the time she was a young student working to put into action the ideals and morals she was raised with. There was something about Joe, and I think vice versa. She made a commitment to him and stuck by him even when it was really difficult. He was in her life for 15 years before passing away last year. He was not an easy person, but he was a very loving person who had had a hard life. She helped him and brought him to her family, and eventually he became family.

Q: I understand she started by writing what was sort of an essay about her experience, and then it became a one-woman show.

A: She was in "Once," the (Broadway) musical, when she started working on it. She did it as a one-woman show at the Cherry Lane Theater in Manhattan. Carolyn Rossi Copeland, who founded the Lamb's Theater in New York City — whose mission is to nurture and develop new American musicals that provide a sense of hope to an otherwise broken world — felt strongly that it had potential to be a larger musical. She met with Elizabeth and said, "I want to help develop this as a show."

Q: What is it that you hope the audience gets out of seeing "Indian Joe?"

A: My hope is that they come away with an understanding of what home means to and for them. And also, hopefully, it will allow them to, next time they see a homeless person, really see that person and acknowledge that person, and perhaps not be so quick to turn away. To see that that person might have the ability to change their life and expand who they are in the world.

Q: Do you have a favorite song in the show?

A: "Sewn Together" is one I find myself singing a lot. She (Liz) is back at home and her mom is helping her with her pageant dress. It becomes a larger metaphor for what is being sewn together and what family is. It becomes about Elizabeth and Joe. Even though he has passed away, they are in the rich tapestry of each other's lives. They are sewn together.

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