



Hackensack writer, actor, director and educator brings activism to stage

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This feature is part of "I Am New Jersey," a Star-Ledger series profiling some of the people who make the Garden State special.

HACKENSACK — The ceiling fan whirs loudly as a group of seven actors, a director and a producer huddle around a fold-out table, poring over their freshly highlighted scripts.

Caseen Gaines is at the center of the table, and the frequent smile that seems to take up half his face gradually spreads to all the performers.

By the time an hour has gone by, hugs have been exchanged among reunited members of the Hackensack Theatre Company and new members have found a place to bond over their shared love of drama.

Their furrowed brows give way to a few laughs as they read through August Wilson's "Fences" for the first time together in the Hackensack Cultural Arts Center.

"It really is a labor of love," says Gaines, the director.

For Gaines, creating theater in his hometown is a reward unto itself. As co-founder and co-artistic director of Hackensack Theatre Company for the past eight years, he takes a salary that covers little more than his gas mileage -- unless a show does poorly at the box office, in which case he forgoes payment completely.

The proceeds from each show go toward the next production -- except when a play or musical's theme lends itself to service that goes far beyond what the term "community theater" usually implies.



Caseen Gaines is a co-founder of the Hackensack Theatre Company - with whom he has raised thousands of dollars for charities dedicated to fighting AIDS and domestic violence. He also works as an author, actor, director and high school teacher.

Tim Farrell/The Star-Ledger

"Sometimes, you do a show just to have fun and, sometimes, you're doing a show because of a greater purpose," he says.

Through ticket sales and donations, Gaines and business partner Felicia Benson-Kraft have raised thousands of dollars for charities, including the Red Cross, Equity Fights AIDS and Shelter Our Sisters, which helps domestic violence victims in Bergen County.

Gaines, 26, also runs the theater department at Hackensack High School, where he maintains his "real job" as an English teacher. He receives a stipend to put on one show, but he's been known to stretch it out to cover two or three, so that more students have the opportunity to perform.

"The most rewarding thing I have done is direct those students at the school," he says.

"When you take a student (who) is surprised that they are cast in a big role in the show because they don't even see their potential, and you're able to bring out -- in the course of 2½ months -- a performance that exceeds their expectations, their friends' expectations and their parents' expectations, there is a magic in that that is unmatched."

Between shows and semesters, Gaines has authored "Inside Pee-Wee's Playhouse: The Behind the Scenes Story of a Pop Phenomenon," a book featuring more than 100 interviews with the show's cast and crew, published by ECW press. He also has been anthologized as a writer in "The Obama Movement: Why Barack Obama Speaks to America's Youth," an essay collection compiled by Joseph Vogel. Gaines is working on a book about "A Christmas Story."

"When I first met him in 2006, he was doing things I had never heard of 19- or 20-year-old people doing," says Rasha Jay, a friend of Gaines' and a regular performer with HTC.

"He was a great person to be around. He encourages you to try new things and not be afraid. That is a wonderful ability to have when you're doing all he's doing -- you have to stay focused and hungry."

IT'S SHOWTIME

Gaines, who grew up in Hackensack and attended Hackensack High School, began Hackensack Theatre Company during his freshman year at Rutgers University, where he triple-majored in journalism, American studies and English. Missing the school play experience, he and his friends decided to stage a show over winter break at the then-new Hackensack Cultural Arts Center.

It was 2004 and the stage in the 115-seat house had not yet been raised above the audience and sat an unimposing few inches off the ground. Gaines and his cohorts had to learn how to work the lights and sound equipment.

Greg Liosi, superintendent of recreation and culture for the city of Hackensack, had opened his doors to HTC. He describes an "incredible sense of pride" at introducing a company that has welcomed and enriched local theatergoers with diverse productions.

That they "go the extra mile" and donate a significant portion of their earnings has prompted Liosi to occasionally come in at 5 or 6 in the morning to help out with equipment.

"I see them making that effort and it makes me want to do the same," he says.

HTC is one of several companies to use the space at the cultural arts center. For new companies starting out, particularly those that want to try organizing a charity production, Liosi says, "Hackensack Theatre Company is my model."

Gaines and Benson-Kraft have produced crowd-pleasing productions such as "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," "Dreamgirls" and "A Raisin in the Sun."

When a show has opened a dialogue about a key issue, HTC has used it as a call to action. Proceeds and donations from "The Vagina Monologues" went to Shelter Our Sisters. From "Godspell," which was set in a climate loosely based on post-Katrina New Orleans, they went to the Red Cross Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund.

After a production of "Rent," audience members were encouraged to give to Equity Fights AIDS. About \$1,500 went into buckets provided by the charity.

"I could not see any person walking by the buckets without giving something," Gaines says. "Some people were giving \$20, \$50, \$100 bills."

"I wish we had the ability to raise money with every show, but sometimes we need to use our earnings to keep the company running," he says. "If we paid ourselves a proper wage, we probably would have been done after a year."

Leading up to each performance with HTC, Gaines spends months directing rehearsals, casting, scouring Craigslist and thrift stores for sets, costumes and props, and promoting the company's work.

ABOUT CASEEN GAINES

Entrée into theater: Gaines wanted to be a child performer after seeing films such as "The Little Rascals." He begged his parents to take him to see an agent when he was 8, fearing he would soon be over the hill.

Time-management secret: Get the larger coffee in the morning and skip the evening refill, to make the most of the day and sleep at night.

Leaving his mark: There's a big black paint spot under the HCAC stage from HTC's early days, when one of his teen performers spilled a full bucket.

Scholarly side: He received a master's degree in American Studies

Other side of the stage: As a student at Hackensack High School, he sang Audrey II in "Little Shop of Horrors" and the title role in "The Who's Tommy."

"The first time we had auditions, I was amazed that people showed up, that you could put a casting notice in a newspaper and people would actually come," he says. "And then I was amazed that we had a show and people walked in off the street because they saw a flier in a window of a deli downtown.

"That inspires you to be more ambitious."

If there is just one show that proves the courage and vision Gaines and Kraft have shown with HTC, it would have to be "Dreamgirls."

The show came right after which they tried "Schoolhouse Rock Live," which Gaines describes as a massive flop. The budget was nearly down to zero.

"It's certainly nerve-wracking," he says. "It's like living paycheck to paycheck. We lived show-to-show for years."

To promote the 2006 version of the film "Dreamgirls" before it came out, the producer, Dreamworks, sponsored local theaters that wanted to present stage productions. The backing helped, but cramming the large-scale musical - complete with a band -- into the house was a challenge.

Even Liosi was skeptical. But the show was a huge success, stabilizing the company's finances and cementing Gaines' confidence in the enterprise while also cultivating favor with performers and audience members.

BACK TO HIS ROOTS

When Gaines thinks about his high school experience, he marks off his school years in terms of when the play was announced, when the cast list went up and when the curtain rose.

"I wanted to go back to my high school because the words of a play are always what resonate with me most," he says. "English seemed like an avenue where I could pass on what I had learned and have the experience of contributing to their theater arts department."

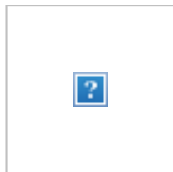
This year, students will be performing "Rent: School Edition," a reworking of the musical that resets "La Bohème" in New York's East Village. The show depicts characters struggling with AIDS, some of whom are gay, and former or current heroin addicts.

When it premiered in 2008, some schools canceled productions after parents protested.

"There is nothing that is discussed on that stage that is not part of the state-approved curriculum in a health class," Gaines says. "I would be floored if someone complained."

Gaines believes the characters' behaviors serve as a cautionary

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tale. In the wake of Tyler Clementi's suicide and other cases of bullying, he also sees the importance of presenting characters of varying sexual orientations onstage and promoting tolerance and understanding.

As part of their preparation for the performance, students will volunteer at an LGBT youth homeless shelter in downtown New

York.

So many students auditioned for the show that Gaines had to cut more than half of them. He spent a full day talking with disappointed aspiring performers after roles were assigned.

That night, he went straight to rehearsal with HTC.

"I don't mind working," he says. "I love creating. I love being able to conceive of something and seeing it through."

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