

Grafton church portrays a trip back to segregation

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GRAFTON — A trip back to the days of segregation through the medium of drama proved to be a transfixing way to celebrate Black History Month for all who attended the performance of *Skin Deep: The Story of Martin Luther King Jr.* at St. Andrew's United Church in Grafton earlier this month.

Rev. John McTavish and Judith Brocklehurst wrote the play, and dedicated it to King and the oldest of his four children, Yolanda (1955-2007).

First produced in a Kitchener church in 1985, with Yolanda King present, it follows the Nobel Prize-winning minister from the 1950s through the 1955 incident with seamstress Rosa Parks that ignited the Civil Rights Movement, through the bombing of the King family home in 1956, right through to his 1968 assassination.

Yolanda was born in 1955, just two weeks before the Rosa Parks incident, and was with her mother Coretta in their home in Montgomery, Alabama, when it was bombed by local segregationists.

Rev. David Lander, who directed the play in Grafton, noted that it was performed the day before the centennial of Rosa Parks's birth.

Natashsia Belkie played the part of the Montgomery seamstress who was going home from a hard day of work on Dec. 1, 1955. Coloured people were supposed to go to the back of the bus, but a weary Parks plopped down into a seat only two or three rows from the front. When the bus grew more crowded, the driver ordered her to the rear. She stayed put, saying she was too tired to move.

Rev. King — at that time an unknown preacher, although a very eloquent one — admired her courage, threw himself into her cause, and the rest is history.

Reflecting on how everything just grew from there, Joan Stover (who played a white woman named Alma, who accepted the prejudices of those days) said it was as if the time was right and the stars were all aligned.

"Once she said, 'No. This has got to stop,' she started a revolution like this. It was really fantastic, when you think of it," Stover said.

Stover recently joined Lander, along with Alwin and Faith Campbell (who played Martin and Coretta King), to



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The cast in the recent production of at St. Andrew's United Church in Grafton included (back, from left) Candace Cox, Alwin Campbell, Lochlan Cox, Leon Silk, with director David Lander, plus (front, from left) Tom Constable, Natashsia Belkie, Gabby Mutton, Faith Campbell and Joan Stover.

reflect on what the play had meant to them. For Stover, it inspired more research into Rosa Parks's life.

"Everybody reaches a breaking point, and it's amazing that an every-day person could start a movement like that. It gives you hope that anything is possible if you believe in something strong enough," Stover said.

"I realize this play was a drama of what went on, but it kind of threw me back in time. I was really embarrassed by the white persons' reactions towards the black people at that time. It was really a humbling experience to be able to be part of that."

While her character Alma was comfortable with things like back-of-the-bus seating and separate drinking fountains for coloured people, Stover was shocked to realize how segregationist policies permeated every-day life.

Alma was friends with a white woman named Maureen (played by Candace Cox), who questioned the prejudices Alma accepted. Cox's son Lochlan and Leon Silk played Bo and Reg, a pair of violent bigots.

Tom Constable played Daniel, a young black man who grew impatient with King's non-violent approach, and a little girl from Castleton named Gabby Mutton rounded out the cast.

Parishioner Shasta Morey added to

the drama with a digital display off to the side that showed the photos of the times: the signs that directed coloured people to the back of the bus or to separate (and usually broken or inferior) drinking fountains, news photos from the Montgomery bus boycott that Parks's actions sparked, footage of King's Aug. 28, 1963, march on Washington, where more than a quarter of a million people heard his famous I Have A Dream speech.

As a tall, rather elegant man of gentle spirit, Alwin Campbell seemed an ideal choice to play King, but there's also the two men's shared willingness to turn the other cheek. He may choose to walk away from a confrontational situation, Campbell said, but that's not weakness — it's a choice.

He recalls the contrast of this nonviolent philosophy to the by-any-means-possible philosophy of Malcolm X, presenting American blacks with a different kind of choice. He wonders how things might have been had Malcolm X had more followers, or if he hadn't been assassinated in 1965.

Campbell often finds himself the subject of surprised second glances, especially from young children holding on to their parents' hands, but he never knows if it's because of his exceptional height or because he's black.



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Grafton resident Alwin Campbell (seen with cast member Gabby Mutton) played Martin Luther King Jr. in a recent play at St. Andrew's United Church in Grafton.

As a black woman of average height, his wife Faith said, "I don't think you are treated badly. You are just invisible."

She recalls as a youngster being dismissed with the phrase, 'Go back to Timbuktu.' It was only as a grown woman that she learned Timbuktu is quite a wonderful place.

She also recalled life in Oshawa in the 1950s.

"The diversity was nothing close to what it became. If you saw a black person, you would run up to say hi. Nobody could have dreamed what Durham would become. I swear, in my lifetime, I will see it in Cobourg," she predicted.

Campbell was delighted the play was presented to a full house, with (she later

heard) people coming from as far away as Port Hope and Brighton.

"Grafton is a good place for that to happen, when you think of the history of Tom," she added, referring to the 14-year-old enslaved boy who was sold for \$75 in Haldimand Township in the spring of 1824, the last enslaved person sold in Canada's 200-year history of slavery.

Stover is sure the audience was not really prepared for what they saw and heard. When using certain racial slurs that were repugnant to her, she said, one could hear a pin drop.

Following the play, cast members were invited to share with the audience what the experience had meant to them. Lander recalls being moved by Candace Cox's tears and the feelings she related.

"Candace lived in Japan, so she understood what it means to be the minority," Faith Campbell said.

"She feels strongly that everybody should get a chance to live in another country where you are the minority, so you understand what it's like. Her emotions were so genuine."

While the adult cast members were familiar with a particularly vile racial slur, young Gabby said it was a word she had never heard. This gladdened Campbell's heart.

"But kids out here are sheltered and don't meet with anybody. Then they go off to university and they are thrown into this," she said.

Still, Campbell had to describe putting on this play as a monumental experience.

"Something magical happened here that night," she stated.

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