Four Wives Share Louis Armstrong’s Story in ‘A Wonderful World’

By Nicole Henry

Armies in white, musicians on stage with a giant: Those are just a few elements of a production that will make its world premiere at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts on March 14. In ‘A Wonderful World,’ readers of this issue of the Miami New Drama are treated to a tour de force as they see the life of Louis Armstrong, who rose from the streets of New Orleans to the heights of American music.

The play, which is being funded by the Miami New Drama, features four wives of Armstrong as they share his story through their eyes. They come to life during the production to not only tell the story of Louis Armstrong without telling the story of racism — that is, without telling the story of racism the way we know about an artist like Elvis … It’s impossible to tell the story of an artist without telling the story of what it was like to be African American. In that way, Armstrong’s story is an extraordinary one.

When they first got together at a restaurant near the Colony, Armstrong and his wife, Helen, “fell in love” at first sight. Armstrong, who had a reputation for being a ladies’ man, claimed that he didn’t fall in love until he met her. She was 19, and he was 40. They were married for 11 years, and had three children together.

The show will get its official premiere at the Theatre on Miami Beach, which has a $1.2 million budget, thanks in part to enhancement money from investors Tom and Renee Rodgers. The production has a $1.2 million budget, thanks in part to enhancement money from investors Tom and Renee Rodgers.

Theatre on Miami Beach.

As impactful, admired and versatile as he was during a lifetime, his death in 1971 at the age of 69, Armstrong's life was the stuff of complicated drama. He was known for his collaborations with other artists, such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, but he was also known for his drug addiction and his relationship with women such as Daisy Parker.

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Hope, who grew up in Orlando, earned her bachelor degree from the University of South Florida and a master of fine arts degree from Florida State University and Sarasota's Asolo Repertory Theatre. She took the subway to Queens to research Lucille Wilson, looking through archives and memorabilia Armstrong's widow donated to the city of New York as well as touring the couple's home.

She is a writer as well as a performer, and she has a deep appreciation for Squire's work on "A Wonderful World."

"The book could stand on its own as a play. I was impressed with how complex it is," she says. "You get smart, fun, sometimes serious and dark commentary on the state of the human soul. I hope it does go to Broadway."

That's a hope shared by everyone involved, though Hausmann is pointed about the musical's South Florida debut.

"This is a black empowerment show written by an African-American member of this community. Aurin is a Miami-Dade guy in all of his writing," he says. "I think this has extraordinary potential. But before that, I want it to resonate profoundly in this community."