

Lessons in action Play tells of LGBTQ history before Stonewall

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Highlight: Eric Marcus (back row, third from left) and Joe Salvatore (back row, fourth from left) meet with cast of "Making Gay History: Beyond Stonewall," which opens Friday at New York University's Provincetown Playhouse.

Body

Voices of early LGBTQ civil rights history are about to take center stage in Greenwich Village, just blocks from where the Stonewall Riots took place more than 50 years ago.

"Making Gay History: Before Stonewall" - a new play adapted from Eric Marcus' "Making Gay History" books and podcast - opens Friday at New York University's Provincetown Playhouse for an eight-performance run.

As research for his 1992 book, "Making History, The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights," Marcus recorded intimate conversations with some of the most pivotal activists and witnesses of LGBTQ history.

"It's very exciting to see the people I interviewed 30 years ago - most of whom are now dead - come to life on stage," Marcus told the Daily News. "It's haunting [and] it's inspiring."

An updated version of the book, "Making Gay History: The Half Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights," came out a decade later, and received the 2013 Stonewall Book Non-Fiction Award.

The conversations documented in these books, which paint a vibrant and detailed picture of the struggles the LGBTQ community faced in search of equality, later became a celebrated podcast. Since its 2016 debut, the award-winning "Making Gay History" became the go-to oral history vault of the decades-long fight. The podcast, now in its sixth season, has been downloaded more than 3 million times in more than 200 countries and territories.

The play - directed by Joe Salvatore, an associate professor of educational theater at NYU - started taking form nearly two years ago, when a Ph.D student attended the first live taping of the podcast in March 2018.

The student approached Marcus and asked him if he'd be interested in speaking with Salvatore, who specializes in documentary theater, to bring some of the interviews to the stage. The rest is history.

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"I have been making plays from interview transcripts for about 20 years," Salvatore told The News. "So it's a process that I know well." But it was still an "interesting learning experience," he said, since it was the first time he worked "with someone else's data."

Salvatore, director of NYU Steinhardt's Verbatim Performance Lab, transformed some of the interviews collected by Marcus into a script, creating a type of performance in which actors reproduce a person's accent, cadence, gestures, and other speech patterns, called "verbatim performance."

Marcus wanted to focus on LGBTQ history before the well-known Stonewall riots, an idea the director jumped at.

"I'm very interested in early-20th century American history and particularly how it relates to LGBTQ experiences. A lot of times I've worked on projects in the past from that era and I think that there are misconceptions about that time," said Salvatore.

Salvatore and Marcus hope to eventually bring the play to high schools and universities to help teach LGBTQ history. With that in mind, Salvatore cast 10 actors to play 20 characters.

"Often times in high school and college settings, directors are looking for large cast productions to involve as many students as possible," he said, explaining that 20 actors can play the individual roles.

Marcus is featured as a character that will be played by all of the actors in the NYU show, which he calls a "surreal" experience.

"I'm portrayed by an African-American woman, a Chinese-American guy, a white lesbian," said Marcus, a 61-year-old white gay male from Queens. "It's mind-blowing."

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