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The Farnsworth Invention

By Sophie Braccini



From left: David Sarnoff (Jeff Draper) and Philo Farnsworth (Michael Doppe) Photo Stu Selland

American life from 1921 to the 1940s and jumps from the East Coast where RCA was born and flourished to San Francisco, the home of the lab in which Farnsworth invented the television.

The two men are different, but both are endearing. They are visionaries, idealists; they both dream larger than life. You wish they'd meet and set out on life's adventures together. But one is a radio man and the other wants to create television. Sarnoff immediately sees the threat and is bound to try to license television through his own engineering team, and not let a self-taught genius reap the benefits of the discovery. To those who tell him that television is a gadget for the rich and ask where people would put such a big device in their homes, he answers, "Where their radio is."

The quality of the casting makes this THT production one of its best vintages. Jeffrey Draper as Sarnoff has a very strong presence and gives a confident representation of a man who was both a humanist and a businessman. Michael Doppe as Philo Farnsworth is instantly believable as the young genius, passionate and visionary.

"Jeff (Draper) came to a reading of the play, but he had a previous engagement and could not play the role," remembers Roster. "Even though we auditioned others, I kept calling him about it because I thought he was the best. Then his schedule opened up and he was able to do it."

Roster says that he thought at first that Michael Doppe was a little young to play Farnsworth. "But Michael is, in real life, a realistic intellectual like Farnsworth; something he brings naturally to the stage."

With the play set in many different times and places the director had to find a way to cue the audience. "We built a large, vintage-looking TV set for the stage that's fed by a laptop," says Roster, "it felt appropriate." The rest of the set is very simple, which is hardly noticeable since the play is packed with action. There are 16 actors performing, many of them playing more than one role.

It takes a few minutes at the beginning of the play to get oriented, and sometimes the science can lose the less physics-savvy among the audience. But quickly spectators 'get it' and the story captivates. Many references are made to the marking events of the time, like the Great Depression and Prohibition, adding to the feeling of being spirited away in a great adventure.

Roster says that a woman came to him after a preview and said that every high school student should see it. "It is non-fiction, but Aaron Sorkin made it clear that it is romanticized," says the director. "Most of the events are true, but there are discrepancies." This does not affect the theatrical experience.

"The Farnsworth Invention" is rated PG13 for adult language. For more information and tickets, visit www.TownHallTheatre.com.

Joel Roster is a tremendous fan of screenwriter and playwright Aaron Sorkin ("A Few Good Men," "The West Wing," "The Social Network"). He heard about Sorkin's play, "The Farnsworth Invention," when it opened on Broadway in 2007, read it and gave it to Town Hall Theatre Artistic Director Clive Worsley last year. "Clive read it in two days and wanted it for Town Hall," recalls Roster. "We checked around and found out it would be a Bay Area premiere. Clive gave me the go-ahead to direct it."

Roster has been Town Hall Theatre's education program director for a few years. He is an actor—he was a great Picasso in THT's production of Picasso at the Lapin Agile— and has directed plays in other Bay Area venues; "The Farnsworth Invention" marks his THT directing debut.

The play opened Feb. 9 and runs through March 2. It is a non-fiction play, or, to be more accurate, a romanticized non-fiction play. It tells the story of the invention of television and the battle to patent it between two amazing men, RCA President David Sarnoff and inventor Philo Farnsworth.

The play is constructed as a narration alternating between the two protagonists. It covers a large span of

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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