

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE



# SWORD PLAY

By Mark Shanahan

Photo by Lynn Lane

It seems somehow fitting that James Black would choose Ken Ludwig's *The Three Musketeers* to close out his season as the Alley Theatre's Interim Artistic Director.

Ken Ludwig's delightful, buoyant adaptation is a swashbuckling ode to the theatre itself, in keeping with the Musketeers' long personal history with the art form. Even Alexandre Dumas, author of the popular 1844 novel, knew they were a perfect fit for the stage.

It was Dumas himself who first adapted his novel as a play, which premiered as *La Jeunesse des Mousquetaires* at the Comedie Francaise in 1849. Dumas had always envisioned D'Artagnan and his friends as great showmen, embarking on escapades filled with dashing swordplay, daring adventure, and high romance, all while facing the most detestable villains France could throw at them. Their transformation from novel to stage included the addition of music and a hefty amount of rewriting but, no matter the changes, the swordsmen became an immediate hit with audiences.

Of course, Dumas was a crowd pleaser. Not only a heralded novelist, he was one of the most famous dramatists of the French Theatre, the author of vaudeville

comedies, historical plays, and melodramas. Dumas had discovered a passion for the theatre as a teen, falling in love with the works of Shakespeare and determining to make a name for himself in Paris as a playwright.

He had written fifteen plays before he gave birth to the novel of *The Three Musketeers*. The book captivated readers with each installment of its publication. His fame afforded Dumas the life he had craved, but circumstances hadn't always been easy for the author. Dumas battled his way into Parisian circles with only his talent and tenacity, traits which are on full display in the tale of D'Artagnan. The character served as a kind of surrogate for the author who was quite an adventurer in his own right.

Dumas' childhood was tempestuous. His father, son of a Haitian slave, rose to the ranks of General in Napoleon's army but died in obscurity when Alexandre was four years old. Young Alexandre felt his father's absence deeply and endeavored in his writing to craft larger than life characters to honor his father's memory. At the core of the story of *The Three Musketeers* is a young man's quest to earn his father's respect, chasing after the French values of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity."

Lacking a formal education, Dumas worked first in a law office and then as a clerk for the Duc d'Orleans, the future king, who took note of his extraordinary penmanship. Now firmly entrenched in high society, he began producing several melodramas which took Paris by storm. With his newfound success, Dumas embarked on a theatrical life with reckless abandon. He authored a string of hit plays, fathered a son out of wedlock, indulged in a scandalous affair with a dressmaker, married and divorced a notable actress, rubbed elbows with Victor Hugo and lived as large as any man of the theatre could, while spending money at an alarming rate. Often partnering with collaborators, he wrote at a dizzying pace, so much so that it had been said that "Nobody has ever read the whole of Dumas, not even himself."

But amidst all of the derring-do and swashbuckling, Dumas wrote with a social conscience. By setting *The Three Musketeers* in the 1600s, two hundred years in the past, Dumas was able to give voice to criticisms of contemporary France, masked as an historical adventure story. Outsider D'Artagnan and his friends Athos, Porthos and Aramis were envisioned by Dumas as the champions of liberty, using their astonishing gifts as swordsmen to fight for personal freedom against the tyranny of Cardinal Richelieu and his minions.

Though the Musketeers have been adapted by countless authors over the last 175 years, Dumas' enduring spirit has remained intact. Certainly, Dumas' story is perhaps less well known than the iconic characters he created, but any adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* must maintain the gallant sensibility deeply embedded in the original work.

Among the many versions to make a mark, silent film star Douglas Fairbanks took his turn as a Musketeer in 1921, setting the tone for Hollywood's

swashbucklers for generations to come. John Wayne took a forgettable stab at being a Musketeer and The Ritz Brothers took a romp with the heroes in the 1930s. Gene Kelly made for an admirable D'Artagnan, blending the dual sensibilities of dancer and swordsman, and director Richard Lester's 1974 brawling comedy remains a staple of late night showings on TV.

In his modern adaptation, Ken Ludwig keeps much of Dumas' tale intact while introducing a new character in D'Artagnan's sister, Sabine. With this addition, Ludwig harkens back to Dumas' penchant for social criticism, giving voice to a renewed hope for equality, her character demanding more than simple fraternity.

Certainly, the play's inherent theatricality, social conscience, and bravura swordplay have allowed our cast and crew a great deal of fun in creating this production. But the real reason I find it fitting that James Black turned to *The Three Musketeers* to close out his season as Interim Artistic Director is because the play addresses something I know is dear to his heart, both as interim leader and longtime company member.

*The Three Musketeers'* famous rallying cry speaks to the camaraderie and teamwork which lie at the very heart of a life in the theatre. The play is, after all, the thing. It brings us together. It lifts us up. The theatre is a collaborative art form, calling upon the actors, designers, the crew, the staff, and most importantly, you, the audience, to create a shared experience in which we can all partake together.

What better way to celebrate the magic of the theatre than by coming together and raising our voices in a heartfelt shout of "ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL!"

It's a mantra worth repeating from one season to the next.