

MEDAL OF HONOR

Phoenix Theatre's Michael Barnard to receive prestigious prize



David M. Brown » *The Entertainer!*

From 1892 to 1954, the 12 million immigrants entering Ellis Island sought the rewards of America.

Michael Barnard, producing artistic director of Phoenix Theatre, recently visited the U.S. National Monument adjacent to the Statue of Liberty in Upper New York Bay as an Ellis Island Medal of Honor recipient. Co-awardees this year at the Ellis Island Honor Society's gala were Henry Louis Gates Jr., Albert II Prince of Monaco and Rep. Adam Schiff.

Barnard's paternal grandmother, a French chanteuse in Paris bars, came through Ellis Island just before the Nazi occupation in 1941. His grandfather helped found Glendale with Sen. Carl Hayden.

"I was nominated by one of the board of directors at the Ellis Island Honor Society and asked to send a biography focusing on my artistic vision and philanthropic contributions," says Barnard, a Phoenix resident.

Since the inauguration of the honor in 1986, seven U.S. presidents have been selected. Others include former Vice President Joe Biden, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Nobel laureates Elie Wiesel and Malala Yousafzai, Coretta Scott King, John Sculley, Muhammad Ali, Lee Iacocca and Rosa Parks.

As described by the Honor Society, "The Ellis Island Medals of Honor embody the spirit of America in their salute to tolerance, brotherhood,

diversity and patriotism. Honorees may be native-born or naturalized, but most importantly, they are individuals who have made it their mission to share their wealth of knowledge, indomitable courage, boundless compassion, unique talents and selfless generosity with those less fortunate."

NEW AUDIENCES, NEW AUTHORS

Born in Glendale, Barnard was mentored early by a high school teacher, Gerri Lee Frye.

"She opened my eyes to theater as an artform and to articulate positive messaging," he recalls. He earned a bachelor of arts at ASU, and then a master's in theater with an emphasis in directing at Northwestern University.

When he began his tenure at Phoenix Theatre in the 1980s, he was guided by another mentor, its board president, Todd Peterson, who encouraged him to work positively and ethically for the community.

"In 1999, I was asked by Phoenix Theatre to restructure its program to welcome new voices and new works, from young and old, famous and nonfamous, addressing themes such as social justice, tolerance and diversity in a relevant way," Barnard says. "At the same time, we were also looking for younger audiences to support the theatrical arts."

The future of live theater concerned those whose careers are tied to it by vocation or avocation: companies, critics, academics, theater aficionados. Fortunately, Barnard says, Phoenix Theatre has been able to shift its following from an average age of 67 to

51. They enjoy works in three different theaters, one, in fact, which focuses on incubating new works.

Many of the productions he has directed and choreographed at Phoenix Theatre have showcased issues dealing with diversity, such as *The Scottsboro Boys*, *In the Heights*, *Beehive*, *Lady Day* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

One of his next projects, developed in the troupe's New Works Incubator, is *Americano*, about a Dreamer, featuring Mexican-inspired hip-hop music. It is expected to be a part of the Phoenix Theatre Festival of New American Theatre in March.

With the nonprofits and charities, Barnard crafts entertainment to articulate messages and fundraising requests. He has directed 1,000-plus special events, a craft he learned while working as a senior show director for the Disney Corp. with a third mentor, Mike Davis, now with Universal Studios. In Anaheim, from an office at Disneyland, he worked on popular shows such as *Pocahontas* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

For community outreach, the company's Partners That Heal program provides comfort and entertainment to children and families in health care and crisis facilities, such as Ryan House, for children and families in life-limiting or end-of-life experiences. And, a summer camp promotes confidence through interactive theatrical and dance experiences for children, teens and adults, for example, with SARRC.

"I use the arts in musical and dramatic contexts," Barnard explains. "These scenes are played out before

the audience, so that they can learn be inspired and engaged to help the institutions."

At a recent event for Liberty Wildlife, which helps promote responsible stewardship, actors dressed as animals.

"They presented their cases about their uniqueness and survival and the importance of the environmental circle," he says.

And, for an Arizona Diamondbacks-sponsored event for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Phoenix at the Kierland Resort, he created an all-star theme for its annual Youth of the Year awards. He created oversized baseball cards explaining their successes.

"This helped the audience know where their money was going and how youths in danger have instead gone down a different path, nurtured by supportive citizens," he says.

With his new medal, Barnard will continue to celebrate how the arts have inspired him.

"I have learned that the arts are invaluable to our quality of life," he says. "They help make us strong, individually and together, inspiring conversation about significant subjects. They are not just entertainment but offer innovative, evocative ways to build acceptance, hope and tolerance within communities that embrace their remarkable promise." ■

For more information about the Ellis Island Honor Society, visit neco.org. For Phoenix Theatre, see phoenixtheatre.org.



\$300 Off Move In
when you mention
Entertainer Magazine!

Offer valid through July 31, 2018.

Restrictions apply, contact property for details.

SkylineLoftsApartments.com (602) 374-1733

