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Review: Ray of Hope presents Blair Holt play

by Shamontiel L. Vaughn



Blair Holt's parents,
Ronald Holt and Annette Nance-Holt

"It's about using the art to make a difference," Victoria Brady, founder of Ray of Hope Center of the Arts, said regarding the play focused on Blair Holt, a teenage youth who'd been murdered on a Chicago Transit Authority bus.

On Tuesday, Aug. 4, the 32-member team of the South Side Chicago arts program Ray of Hope used their creative talents to make a difference with the performance of "*Blair's Story—The Blair Holt Story*," at 2 pm in the DuSable Museum, located on 740 E. 56th Pl. Free to the public, this two-hour play was performed in collaboration with the DuSable Museum for the nonprofit apprentice program, After School Matters.

Two years ago on May 10, 2007, 16-year-old Chicagoan Blair Holt was gunned down on a CTA bus. Holt wasn't the intended target, but that didn't matter to him when he used his body as a shield to protect his Julian High School classmate Tiara Reed. According to Chicago Police, the shooting was in retaliation over a girl, but after shooting four other people and killing Holt, Michael "Mario" Pace did not shoot his intended target. Pace was sentenced to 100 years in prison for his crime. Kevin Jones, who police said supplied Pace with the gun, was sentenced to 10 years.

"*The Blair Holt Story*," based on the real-life story of Blair Holt, began with choral angels surrounding Blair Holt (played by lead songwriter and primary music producer Kevin Tyler). Holt looked around, confused about why he was in Heaven. The voice of God (audio by principal script writer and music producer Lamajiah Smith) explained to him what happened on his last days in May.

In a series of events, the audience was able to see the fictional incidents play out: Holt's killer (for legal purposes, the killer's name in the play was Jason, played by Lamajiah Smith) plotting the scenario in his home with a friend--his mother only a few feet away in the kitchen; Holt's mother (played by Diamond Franklin) worrying about the violence happening to Chicago Public School students; Holt hanging out with friends before school and Holt covering his friend's body before being shot.

In a scene with Jason, Judge Nicholas Ford (played by Kevin Guise) stated, "It is our babies that are pulling these triggers and taking these lives" before reciting the sentence that Jason would receive.

This one comment was met by a round of applause, and the entire play received a standing ovation. The play was written in three weeks and performed after six weeks of rehearsal, and although Brady joked about being hard on the cast, all of the team standing onstage after the play wore smiles of relief or satisfaction once the play was complete. The script was raw, gritty and a sniffle or two was heard during the slideshow presentation of the real life Blair Holt through the years—his love of hip hop, sports, young ladies, fashion, graduation and baby years.

But what made the play outstanding was two things—the first being that it was more than obvious that the cast had a significant role in how the play would be written and created. Instead of preaching to the audience about teen violence and Chicago crime, they took an intense but entertaining route; they gave the audience their thoughts through surprisingly impressive hip hop rhymes. I was not ready for the skill level that some of these lyricists had.

During songs I didn't want to bob my head to because they were based on this sad story, I couldn't help it. With talented music producers like Phil Jones, Lamajiah Smith, Phil Bryan and Kevin Tyler, hip hop lovers couldn't help but take notice. And when Jerrell Leeks (who played Blair's friend, BC) and James Bryan (who played Mr. Holt, Blair's father) broke out into song, heads lifted and shoulders squared to listen to two powerful voices. Lyrical choreography by Franklin also got appreciative nods.

As hard as this situation was to bear, Blair Holt's parents—Ronald Holt and Annette Nance-Holt—used it to fight against teen violence and were also sitting in the front row. On Sunday, June 21, Congressman Bobby Rush awarded Ronald Holt with a "Father of the Year" award for his anti-violence advocacy.

At the end of the play, they both came onstage. Ronald Holt talked about their efforts to create the Blair Bill.

Before and after the play, audience members were encouraged to sign the petition outside to support Blair's Bill. According to Congressman Rush, the bill will "...assist law enforcement in tracking the flow of guns and require those who possess them to be trained in gun safety."

"When the young people stand up, that's when our community will begin to change," Brady said.

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