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Robinson Remembered on Stage in New Play

by John Torenli

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There's never a bad time to stop and pay tribute to Jackie Robinson. The Brooklyn baseball icon was one of the most influential figures of the 20th century.

But it just seems that now, when ballplayers are going after fans in the stands after a mere verbal slight, the former Dodger second baseman's incredible courage, poise and determination shine through stronger than ever.

That's why it's most appropriate that Bronx-born playwright Fred Newman has chosen this coming month to unveil his new play, *Stealin' Home*, which will open at the Castillo Theatre on 42nd Street on Oct. 8.

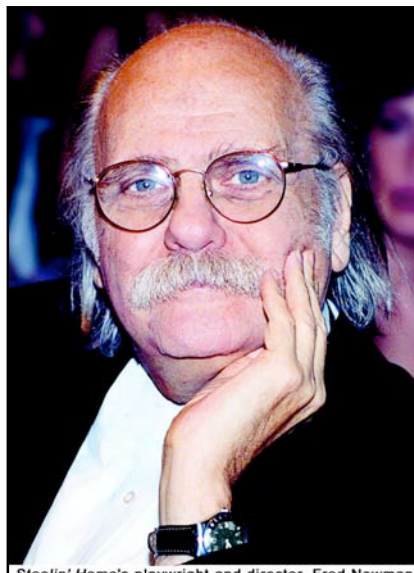
With baseball's playoffs and World Series just around the corner, Newman will re-create the life of Robinson 47 years to the day after Walter O'Malley announced he was moving the Dodgers out of Brooklyn.

The play explores Robinson's life from 1947 — the year he broke baseball's antiquated and bigoted color line — until his death, as well as his friendship with Dodger teammate and captain Pee Wee Reese. It was Reese, a white southerner, who walked over and put his arm around Robinson when he was being viciously race-baited at a game in Cincinnati during his rookie year — a scene so poignant it was recreated as a statue in our fair borough.

But the play is about much more than the history Robinson made as baseball's first African-American major leaguer. It also speaks to the cultural and social change that took place in America in the years during and after his entry into the majors.

"To the bigoted players and fans, integrating baseball was like having a stranger show up in the middle of having sex with your wife," said Newman, the author of over 30 stage works, including last year's *Crown Heights* — a drama concerning the race-fueled events in that Brooklyn neighborhood in 1991.

Newman, who has also written plays about Satchel Paige, Mickey Mantle and Thomas Jefferson, doesn't promise to deliver the "real" Jackie Robinson in his play. Because, he insists, we never really knew the man who helped change the way we think and feel about race in America.



Stealin' Home's playwright and director, Fred Newman.

"To a large extent, that distinction — between the real Jackie and my (or your) Jackie — is one very tragic theme of the play," he said. "For ultimately, there was no 'real' Jackie Robinson; there were only the subjective images of this extraordinary athlete and social symbol who broke baseball's vulgar color barrier in 1947."

So why would a kid from the Bronx grow up idolizing a ballplayer that tried to beat the Yankees in the World Series seemingly every year?

"To me, as a lonely 12-year-old, Robinson was far more a profound subjective experience than a real person in my sad childhood," the author notes.

"And so it was for millions, young and old. To me and, no doubt, so many others, Jackie and his 'Boys of Summer' were the joy of childhood that was nowhere to be found in my own unhappy youth. My father, who died suddenly in 1945 at 51 years of age, left a gaping hole in my life and a frightening emptiness in my home. Baseball, in general, and Robinson's Dodgers, in particular, filled it."

The Yankees did not integrate until adding catcher Elston Howard to the roster in 1955 — eight years after the Dodgers signed Robinson. Though they racked up title after title from 1941-64, the Bronx Bombers never held the same allure Robinson and the Dodgers did for Newman.

"Growing up in the Bronx, literally in the shadow of Yankee Stadium, I was, of course, a Yankee fan," he admits. "But the Yankees were too close to home to be fully exotic. Besides, they won all the time ... and besides, the Dodgers were in the National League...and besides, the Yankees were too white.

Jackie Robinson's Dodgers — unlike Mantle's bourgeois Bronx Bombers — were joy incarnate. He and they lived in my fantasies."

Broadway newcomer Garrett Hendricks will play Robinson and Andy Parker fills the role of Pee Wee. Through Newman's words and direction, the duo hopes to remind audience members just how important it was for a white ballplayer to not only support Robinson during those trying times, but to physically embrace him in the face of racism.

More than a half century later, Reese's grip around Robinson's shoulder can still be felt in the heart of Brooklyn and throughout the country. Newman just wants to make sure we feel it all over again — up close and personal.

"Life is far more joyous now, but Jackie is still there exciting me," Newman said. "He is one of the great loves of my life, although we never actually met."

For ticket information, call 212-941-1234.