

Playwright pays tribute to Robinson

Drama humanizes Dodger's life, kinship with Reese

Andrew Gross

Playwright Fred Newman often chooses "monumentalized" subjects and explores the human being he imagines they really were. Such is the case with his latest play, "Stealin' Home (A Baseball Fantasy)," which focuses on Jackie Robinson.

"It's from the perspective of what he meant to me as a 12-year old," said the 69-year-old Bronx native, who grew up a block away from Yankee Stadium. "I thought of him all the time. He was heroic. I thought he was doing an important thing and he was a great ballplayer."

"Stealin' Home" follows Robinson's life from 1947, when he broke baseball's color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers, to his death in 1972. It opens a scheduled two-month run tonight — the 47th anniversary of the Dodgers' move to Los Angeles — at the Castillo Theatre on 42nd Street.

The play, which Newman also directs, pays particular attention to the friendship between Robinson (Garrett



Contributed photo
Garrett Hendricks plays Jackie Robinson in "Stealin' Home (A Baseball Fantasy)" which opens tonight at the Castillo Theatre on 42nd Street.

Hendricks) and Pee Wee Reese (Andy Parker).

"Jackie Robinson, in my play, I think he's basically a good human being who lives his life under too much pressure and runs into trouble," said Newman, who has written more than 30 shows, including a drama about pitcher Satchel Paige and a musical, "Mantle, Maris and

Mom: The Goys of Summer," about growing up near the Stadium.

"What this play is about is how we forget that he actually was a real human being," said Newman, who once briefly resided in Yonkers. "We make so much use of him that he became an icon and he became dehumanized. I want to challenge people who hold on to the official story."

Newman's co-director, David Nackman, grew up in Nanuet and attended Clarkstown South.

Newman said he never had the chance to meet Robinson but is close to several sportswriters who were able to relate details of his life. Among them is famed author Roger Kahn, who wrote "The Boys of Summer," the definitive book about the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Somehow, Newman managed to juggle being a Yankees fan with idolizing Robinson, though now he admits, "rooting is a pain. I'm too old to root." Reach Andrew Gross at agross@thejournalnews.com.