

Friday, February 4, 2005

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

A husband, a wife, an untold story, a play

STACI SWEDEEN

For The Journal News

If you leave the office at 5 (instead of 8), you have Lucy Parsons to thank, even if you don't know it.

Lucy and her husband, Albert, successfully fought for the eight-hour workday at the end of the 19th century. But if you've never heard of her, you're not alone.

Melody Cooper wants to change that.

Cooper, a Hastings-on-Hudson playwright and actor, has written a full-length historical drama, "Day Of Reckoning," which opens tonight and runs weekends through Feb. 27, part of Black History Month at the All Stars Project's performing and education center on West 42nd Street in Manhattan.

The cast includes Cooper as Lucy, Christopher Conant as Albert, David Adams as Albert Parsons Jr., and Parris Nicole Cisco and Alima Lindsey (Cooper's 12-year-old daughter) double-cast in the role of Lulu Parsons.

"I had never heard of Lucy Parsons in history books or class," Cooper said. "Then I came across a picture of her online and became fascinated. ... Here's this



Roger Grunwald

Melody Cooper and Christopher Conant in "Day of Reckoning," opening tonight.

woman who was involved in the Haymarket riots, an ex-slave married to an ex-Confederate soldier. They were both responsible for our current eight-hour workday, infamous anarchists, and now you don't hear anything about them."

Cooper researched and found a letter Albert sent to Lucy before he was hanged, on Nov. 11, 1887. (He was convicted for conspiracy to commit murder in inciting someone to throw a bomb into a crowd.)

"It gave me chills," she says. "Then I found some information about their son, who they ended up putting in an insane asylum. It started out as a two-character play, but when I read that I knew there was this whole other side."

Having written short stories and poems, and noting the lack of "strong,

meaty roles for African-American actors," Cooper took action. "Instead of waiting around for those roles, I decided to create my own work."

Cooper isn't possessive when it comes to her new play: "Day of Reckoning" will be performed by another actress, at the New Theatre in Miami in November. "Lucy's story is big enough to be inhabited by others," she says.

"I want the audience to come away interested and energized by our own history, to learn more about it and to be more active in their own lives," Cooper says. "Whatever form it takes, it's important that we all keep aware, keep fighting and keep the passion for what's right."

Staci Swedeen is a playwright and actress who lives in Sleepy Hollow.

'Day of Reckoning'

Performances: Feb. 4-27.

Show times: Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.;

Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$15, senior and students \$10, group discounts available.

Where: All Stars Project, 543 W. 42nd St. (between 10th and 11th avenues), Manhattan.

Call: 212-941-1234.

Online: theatreforthewholecity.com.