Forgotten: The Murder at the Ford Rouge Plant

The rousing labor folk/jazz opera, “Forgotten: The Murder at the Ford Rouge Plant” returns to the stage for one performance only on Friday, March 26, 2010 at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts in Clinton Township.

With a cast that includes both professional actors and rank-and-file workers from Detroit-area unions, “Forgotten” tells the true story of the Rev. Lewis Bradford, a Methodist pastor who established a radio program over WXYZ in the 1930s, “The Forgotten Man’s Hour,” on which Bradford interviewed unemployed and homeless workers at the Howard Street Mission in downtown Detroit.

Among the characters in the show are Henry Ford, his “enforcer” Harry Bennett, Father Charles Coughlin, the right-wing “radio priest,” Henry Ford’s wife Clara, and other historical figures.

Bradford’s great nephew, Steve Jones, wrote 25 songs celebrating Bradford’s life. The opera includes tuneful and catchy numbers like “When You Organize” and “We Speak Louder than Machines,” as well as songs about historical events like “The Ford Hunger March,” and “The Battle of the Overpass.” A perennial show-stopper, “Radio, Guns and Money” features Ford, Bennett, and Coughlin describing their favorite ways to stem the rising tide of unionism.

Bradford was found fatally injured in an isolated part of the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn in late 1937, and died of his injury a few days later. While growing up, Jones had heard the story of Bradford’s life and in 2001 traveled to Detroit from his home in Maryland. After much digging, he found the autopsy report for Bradford and took it to the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s office, which declared that Bradford’s death, then labeled as an “accident,” should probably have been termed homicide.

Bradford was a member of Detroit’s Central United Methodist Church on Grand Circus Park, where rehearsals for the musical are taking place. Elise Bryant returns to
Detroit to direct the show, and Bill Meyer, well-known jazz pianist and arranger, is the music director. More than 20 of Bradford’s descendants and relatives are planning to attend this performance. The performance is dedicated to the memory of Dave Moore, the last remaining survivor of the 1932 Ford Hunger March, who died last fall.

Ticket prices are $20 for general admission or $30 for Gold Circle seats. Students and faculty members, unemployed residents, and seniors can buy tickets for $10. Tickets are available at the Macomb Box Office, or by calling 586-286-2222. Information, sound clips, an original cast CD recording, and press reviews are available at www.forgottenshow.net.