

A leap of faith... in human nature, at Anna Maria

Death row is subject of one-man show

BY MELISSA MCKEON

It's more than a parachute jump from a military attack helicopter to the glare of the footlights on stage, but Rhode Island resident Ken Carnes has made the "leap."

"From left brain to right brain," he calls it.

On February 26, Carnes will challenge an audience to make a different leap, from the world of the safe suburban campus of Anna Maria College to death row.

Carnes' one-man-show, "Last Words" will have its Worcester-area debut that night at 7 p.m. at Anna Maria College's Zecco Performing Arts Center.

In the play, Carnes takes the actual words of many death row inmates and turns them into a monologue by a composite character, Albert L. Peoples, who faces his last appeal.

Peoples' drama is that of the man who changes from one who fights to one who accepts, and finds compassion and forgiveness, a necessary human change.

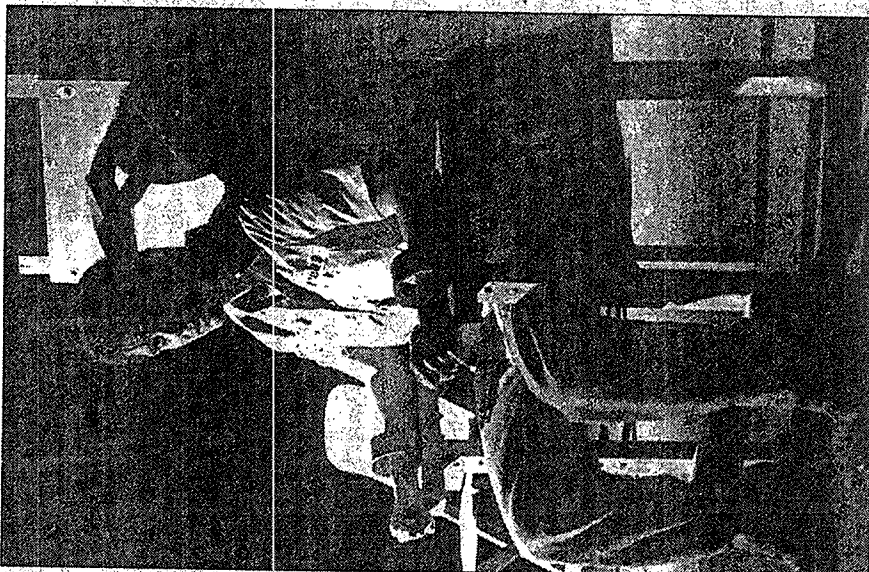
Carnes' background contains a lot of changes of direction of a different kind. From a military helicopter pilot with a political science education at Providence College to a master's degree in holistic mental health counseling with a concentration in art expressive therapies at Salve Regina College in Newport, Carnes made another, this time shorter, leap, to the stage. It wasn't just his own acting that shaped his career, however.

Carnes, 32, founded the Healing Stage in Wakefield, R.I. to help troubled adolescents, through drama, find a way out of the downward spiral of drugs, alcohol, abuse, violence and victimhood.

Though Carnes' group performs in schools and other places adolescents find themselves, it's engaging them in drama themselves, in small groups, that he believes helps them find their way out.

"Talk falls short; action methods can get us there," Carnes says.

"There," to Carnes, is to a place where reliving the past, with all its brutality, gives adolescents the catharsis they might need to change their course, to find compassion for themselves and their own victims, and go on to



Ken Carnes in "Last Words"

more peaceful, productive lives.

"A victim who's been traumatized can revisit the past and undo, re-experience, by using drama, by using the imagination. They become empowered," he says.

Thoughts on mortality

Writing, directing and performing his own play, however, was another leap for Carnes, one he went looking for as his own catharsis.

Carnes found himself thinking about mortality after his father's death, and wondering how he could translate personal thoughts on mortality into his art.

"I was already looking at violence, I was looking at oppression, looking at troubled teens. I said 'Where's the worst setting, where's the hatred, where's violence?'" he recalls. "That's where I came to death row."

Carnes began to do his research, and talked to inmates, finding vastly different reactions to the experience of facing such a definite death.

"There were some really good ones and there were some really bad ones," he says of the death row inmates he researched.

"I think the story of many, was almost a false sense of compassion, 'Well, I'm going to die, so I'm very sorry,'" Carnes says. "That's not what I was going after. The story I was going after was one that was deeper than that."

One of those deeper stories was found in the words of Jarvis Masters, an inmate on death row who became a Buddhist monk. Carnes also unearthed lesser known tales with similar messages through letters and interviews with those on death row.

"I was discovering that voice of reconciliation, of compassion," he says. "However small, it was there."

It's that voice that Carnes' character finally discovers. "The character in my play comes to a point that, whatever society decides, it's okay, he's transcended the fear of death," Carnes says.

Albert L. Peoples, has learned compassion for others — his victims, and for himself, Carnes says.

Hot topic

Though discussions of the death penalty surface with regularity at both a state and national level, Carnes' play comes to no definite conclusion about that political decision, he says.

But Carnes notes that because drama is about humanity, putting a human face on those whom society looks down upon can change the way audiences view the political debate.

"In drama, you're asking people to sympathize with the person on the stage, to recognize themselves," he says. "Self-recognition, he acknowledges, does make it harder to think of executing them."

Carnes is clear that the purpose of his play is to present a compelling story about a man facing execution, not to take a stand on the death penalty.

"That's a debate that I don't think will ever be solved," he says.

Ken Carnes' one-man-show "Last Words" will be performed at Anna Maria College's Zecco Performing Arts

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