

Oh, What a Night

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
October 2018

A boxer, singer, athlete, and minister meet at Hampton House



Muhammad Ali really shouldn't have been in the boxing ring with Sonny Liston back in February 1964 in Miami Beach.

Liston was the world heavyweight champion, considered one of the most formidable boxers of all time. Ali, "the Louisville Lip," was thought to be mostly trash talk and sweet moves.

The match attracted worldwide attention, and some would say the fight entered the annals of history as one of the top sporting events of the 20th century.

The 22-year-old Ali won.

There are many stories of Ali training on Miami Beach and having to cross the causeway at night because Miami Beach, a segregated and unwelcoming city for blacks, had no hotels for African Americans.

But this night turned out to be special, and not just because of Ali's victory. He left Miami Beach to join some companions at the jumping Hampton House motel and music venue in Brownsville;

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those companions were Malcolm X, the R&B singer Sam Cooke, and the football great Jim Brown.

No one knows exactly what was discussed, but not long after, Cassius Clay would change his name to Cassius X (he'd quietly joined the Nation of Islam earlier). Also that year, Cooke would release "A Change Is Gonna Come," which would become an anthem of the civil rights era. Brown was becoming known off the football field as a champion for black equality and justice. Along with Malcolm X, all four men would be known forever in the ring of social activism.

It's a story that playwright (and television writer) Kemp Powers could not resist, and he debuted the one-act *One Night in Miami* in Los Angeles in 2013.



Michel Hausmann, the artistic director of Miami New Drama, one of our region's newest theater companies, knew this was the play to open his second full season with at Miami Beach's Colony Theatre, where New Drama is the resident company. The Colony also sits only blocks from the site of the 1964 fight.

To add to the historical significance, the October 4 kickoff will be at the newly restored Hampton House.

Miami native Carl Cofield, part of the inaugural class of the New World School of the Arts and graduate of University of Miami, is the play's director. He also directed the play's world première in L.A. and is currently the associate artistic director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem.

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Kieron J. Anthony, the actor playing Cassius Clay, also has Miami roots; he was a sprinter in his native Trinidad and Tobago before coming to run for University of Miami, where he studied biology. Today he's a full-time actor and teacher.

Esau Pritchett, as Jim Brown, is well known for his television appearances, including roles in *Orange Is the New Black* and Chicago PD. Leon Thomas, who plays Sam Cooke, is a singer and actor with Broadway credits in *The Lion King* and *The Color Purple*, among others, and starred on TV's *Victorious* alongside Ariana Grande.

It's a high-powered cast, says Hausmann, worthy of continuing the story that still does not have an ending. "These are issues that are still national and local," he says. While Miami Beach is no longer officially segregated, "today we have Colin Kaepernick," the San Francisco 49ers quarterback who took a knee during the national anthem and sparked another sports-led activist movement.

"The conversation is not yet finished; these issues are still not in the open -- this is the type of play that can continue the dialogue," he says.

