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A new testament: Texas playwright relives the 1998 James Byrd Jr. lynching

20 years ago, Texan's 'outing' intersected with shocking crime

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The brutal lynching of James Byrd Jr. has been chronicled in a movie and several popular songs in the 20 years since he was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to death by three white supremacists on a remote country road in Jasper, Texas.

For aspiring playwright Jon-Marc McDonald, those old times of his youth in southeast Texas are not forgotten.

McDonald, a former Texas political operative raised in a deeply conservative Southern Baptist family, is staging a play in the New York Theater Festival this month recalling one of the most shocking hate crimes of modern U.S. history — one that left permanent scars on a sleepy town of 7,600 a little more than 100 miles from Houston.

The tragedy also coincided with McDonald's brief stint on the 1998 campaign of now U.S. Rep. Brian Babin, a conservative Republican then making an unsuccessful bid to represent the rugged patch of Gulf Coast between Houston and the Louisiana state line.

Babin's chances were not helped by McDonald's decision, then 21, to abruptly quit the campaign with a press release announcing he was gay.

"Babin abhors homosexuality," McDonald wrote. "I am a homosexual. Therefore, I can no longer work for someone who thinks that my sexuality is a disease, a sin and unnatural."

Byrd's murder and McDonald's resignation unquestionably shook small-town, east rural Texas in the summer of 1998. Both episodes come back to light in McDonald's play, "Relatively Conscious."

The common thread: fear and intolerance — fatal in Byrd's case — spaced apart by two months and a few miles of country road.

The memories are not happy for anyone involved, including Babin, now in his second term in Congress. He declined comment on the production other than to dispute, through a spokesman, pretty

much the entirety of McDonald's account of his 1998 campaign against Democrat Jim Turner — including the charge that Babin was virulently anti-gay.

But the legacy of Byrd's lynching is undisputed. Dragged semi-conscious along an asphalt road until a culvert severed his right arm and head, Byrd became a catalyst for Texas' hate crimes law and, later, the federal Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law in 2009.

McDonald's play picks up the story in the aftermath of Byrd's death, when the FBI, politicians, Jesse Jackson, Klan sympathizers and the state and national press corps descended on Jasper. Residents suddenly were reeling in tragedy, suspicion, and racial tension.

"Byrd's murder and my resignation are what sparked the rage that gives this play its fire," said McDonald, now a 41-year-old writer, theater student, and gay activist.

The semi-autobiographical play, which ran February 6, 7 and 10 at the Hudson Guild Theater in New York, is set against the backdrop of the investigation into Byrd's killers, who all faced either death or life in prison.

Newton County Sheriff Billy Rowles, portrayed by Jon Voight in the 2003 TV movie "Jasper, Texas," said the town has learned to live with the continuing notoriety, however painful.

"Jasper got a big, old scar back in them days," said Rowles, who was the town's sheriff when Byrd was killed. "It's healing, but it's like any other scar, it's still there. You bump that old injury and it flares up again."

'Truly bizarre'

In his only public remarks at the time, Babin called McDonald's departure a "truly bizarre incident." He also was quoted saying it highlighted a "major difference" between him and Turner, his Democratic opponent.

Turner, as a state senator, had voted to create a hate crimes law that includes protections for gays. Babin said he opposed the "gay rights agenda."

For McDonald, something about the recent Byrd killing stirred a feeling of menace. That was heightened by a 3 a.m. telephone call he received one night on the campaign trail.

"We know who you are," said the caller, who remains anonymous to this day. "We're going to out you."

"I was 21, and I freaked out," McDonald recalls. "I sat on it for a day. The following day, I went to campaign headquarters. I was the only one there, and I issued a press release. Blast-faxed it out to the media without telling Babin."

Then he left the campaign headquarters in Woodville, where Babin, a local dentist, had served as mayor and a city councilman.

Intending to drive back to D.C., McDonald stopped at a local gas station in Jasper, where he heard that the news of his resignation was already on the local radio.

“I was already a story, and I freaked out,” McDonald recalls. “Because all of a sudden it came to me. If they can drive a black man behind a truck in a place like this… The top of my mind was what happened to Byrd.”

The real-life McDonald was in fact on an epic journey, running not only from Jasper, but from his roots in Fort Worth, where he was raised as a conservative Southern Baptist. He was taught to “love the sinner, but hate the sin” — the two chief sins being abortion and homosexuality.

“Those were the two main issues driving their thought process,” McDonald said of his family, including his grandfather, the late James E. Coggin, a prominent Southern Baptist minister.

In that social environment, McDonald’s sexuality was clearly a problem, though he says he didn’t see it at the time. Turning to alcohol, he dropped out from Baylor when he was 20. He knocked about several jobs in Washington, D.C., until his aunt, former congressional candidate Olivia Eudaly, recommended him for Babin’s campaign.

At the time, McDonald still identified outwardly as a Republican Christian conservative. But inside, he had a secret. That conflict culminated in his break from Babin, who he publicly accused of once having said homosexuals should be shot. Babin denied the charge.

Despite McDonald’s differences with the conservative politics of East Texas, he says he has no desire to cast Jasper in a bad light. “There are really good people there,” he said.

‘It will never go away’

Texas, meanwhile, has tried to move on. A year after the lynching, state legislators took up new hate crimes legislation using the testimony of Byrd’s family — forcing them to relive their personal tragedy.

“Sometimes you have to go beyond your pain for what is best,” said Byrd’s sister, Louvon Byrd Harris. “If you don’t talk about it, young people growing up now will never know what happened in our generation’s time. They need to be aware so it stops.”

“It’s still alive. It will never go away,” said Booker T. Hunter, the longtime head of the Jasper branch of the NAACP. “This community will never get over it.”

Byrd’s family went on to create the James Byrd Foundation for Racial Healing. The tenth anniversary of the murder was marked by a remembrance held in Jasper’s newly renamed James Byrd Jr. Memorial Park.

McDonald credits writer James Baldwin with helping him understand the root causes of intolerance, racial or otherwise. In 2016, he wrote a school paper titled, “Relatively Conscious: The Enduring Rage of Baldwin and the Education of a White Southern Baptist Queer.”

The play followed. “And the play calls out a lot of people, some of whom you wouldn’t expect,” he said. “This play is going to be controversial and I meant it to be. I want people walking out of the theater questioning everything, especially themselves.”

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