On Campus

Staging History, as Kennedy Would Like It

Spring 2013

A new drama award honoring the late Senator Ted Kennedy and administered by Columbia University Libraries was presented for the first time in March.

The Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History, known as the EMK Prize, went to Dan O'Brien's *The Body of an American* and Robert Schenkkan's *All the Way*. The playwrights will share a $100,000 award, making the EMK Prize one of the most generous for creative writing in the United States.

The prize was created by Jean Kennedy Smith, a former US ambassador to Ireland and the late senator's sister, to commemorate what she describes as Ted Kennedy's twin passions: art and history.

"My brother loved the arts — museums, books, the performing arts," she says. "Music was perhaps dearest to him, but he and I shared an enjoyment of theater — especially, for Teddy, musical theater. He was also a great student of American history and made it come alive for many of us in the Kennedy family."

The inaugural winners found innovative ways to bring history alive for audiences. O'Brien's *The Body of an American*, which premiered at Portland Center Stage in Oregon last year, is about the playwright's friendship with war photographer Paul Watson, who took an infamous photo of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1993. The play describes the emotional toll the event took on the photojournalist. Schenkkan's *All the Way* recounts Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous first year as president, when the Texan was trying to push John F. Kennedy's civil-rights legislation through Congress. It is told partly through the eyes of Martin Luther King Jr., George Wallace, J. Edgar Hoover, and Hubert Humphrey. *All the Way* opened at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival last summer.

The University’s Center for New Media Teaching and Learning is now creating websites that will feature study and teaching guides, historical research, and scholarly discussions related to the plays.

“There is something of critical importance to human memory — to the way that a society remembers — that drama uniquely supplies,” said Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Tony Kushner ’78CC at a March 4 prize ceremony at Low Rotunda attended by several members of the Kennedy family. “This hybrid of memory and imagination, of systematized recall and the tumult of dreams, is essential to the health of society, of human community, and hence consonant with the progressive political legacy of a great legislator.”



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >