

Looking back at Paige and Gibson

Two New York plays highlight Negro Leagues stars

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Some of the greatest baseball to ever be played went largely unnoticed in a racially divided America, but over 60 years since Jackie Robinson broke the Major League color barrier, the fantastic stories of the Negro Leagues endure.

Starting Jan. 31 and running through most of Black History Month, baseball fans and theatre-goers can revel in the telling of some of the most incredible stories from this era when they see “Satchel: A Requiem for Racism,” a historic play by Fred Newman that will play at the New Federal Theatre.

“Satchel” follows an African-American Harvard student taking a train to Florida and, as luck would have it, sitting next to Satchel Paige himself. Paige, the legendary Negro Leagues pitcher and character who finally made it to the Majors as an old man, is on his way to Spring Training and teaches the young man something Harvard never could: the impact of segregation on the black community.

“Satchel” will be staged at the New Federal Theatre as part of a double bill with “Josh” by Michael A. Jones. “Josh” focuses on the famed Negro League catcher, slugger and close friend to Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson.

“We always wanted to do something on baseball, especially Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson,” says Woodie King Jr., the artistic director of the New Federal.

“One of the things about doing these types of plays is that it’s very important for young baseball players, especially black players, to know who pioneered, who made it possible for them to be where they are today. A lot of the younger players can come in and see the journey of Satchel Paige, the journey that Josh Gibson took, and see it in a literary, entertaining kind of way.”

The plays were especially gratifying for director Eric Coleman, who grew up in Louisville, Ky., with



Preview of

‘Satchel: A Requiem of Racism’ and ‘Josh’
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a father who had seen the Negro League players when they came through town.

“I was very excited about the plays simply because people do not know these names, not nearly enough,” Coleman said. “(My father) saw Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige. Being a baseball fan and overall sports fan, he would share those stories with me, even as a child. I think people should know these names. They’re important in sports history.

“This is history to some of us, but it’s toally revelatory and new to so many others. (People) leave the theater feeling, ‘There were two great lives well-lived and well-worth looking at.’”

Writer Newman couldn’t agree more. A lifelong New Yorker, Newman grew up in a Bronx apartment building that overlooked center field in Yankee Stadium. He said he watched Satchel pitch when the Black Yankees played in the House that Ruth Built when the Yankees were on the road.

“He was just living his life and doing what he could do and dealing with the situation he was in, which was not an easy situation,” Newman said of Paige. “This was before baseball was integrated.

“He lived the life of an African-American ballplayer in a segregated game. I found something very attractive in that.”

Doug Miller is a Senior Writer for **MLB.com/Entertainment**. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.