

# History and Mystery: Two shows at Theatre at KI performed by Neill Hartley

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By Jessica Hutchison

When Neill Hartley puts on a one-man show, he takes the task quite literally. Not only does he play up to five characters in a single performance, he also creates the show, chooses the props, seeks out authentic period clothing, directs and even does his own lighting. The thrill of the two shows, “FDR — a New Deal for America” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” he performs Saturday, April 18 and Sunday, April 19 at Theatre at KI manifests in the struggle and pursuit of doing what is right.

Hartley began acting his one-man shows after he became interested in portraying historical figures. Too tall, at 6 feet 4 inches, to play many people besides Abraham Lincoln, he crafted a show from the short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” written by Washington Irving. This story follows Ichabod Crane in his pursuit to teach schoolchildren to his maximum potential and to prove to his love interest that he offers the best life for her.

“Ichabod is always trying to do the right thing,” says actor Neill Hartley, “through his journey of trying to be the best man for Katrina Van Tassel and to be the best teacher.”

Ichabod Crane’s noble pursuit for the heart of the woman he loves ends finally when his passion for storytelling haunts him on his ride home one night. However honorable his character, Ichabod meets a mysterious end, only to become one of the town’s stories he had so loved to tell. Hartley said the power of this story has caused “entire audiences to scream and jump in terror.” Even so, the show is not too scary for children. In “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Hartley prefers to use minimal props because “people’s imaginations are so vivid, if you allow them to open their imaginations, they will see all sorts of things,” he says.

Both shows have universal appeal for a broad age-range, touching on fiction and romance, American history and great personal triumph. In order to make the stories believable through the multiple characters portrayed, Hartley takes on different physical demeanors and different vocal styles. Experienced in teaching speech and dialect classes at several local universities, including Temple University, St. Joseph’s University and the University of the Arts, Hartley comes prepared as a fine-tuned performer with the ability to maneuver himself into these different characters. In “FDR — a New Deal for America,” Hartley plays Franklin Delano Roosevelt, equipped with actual dialogue, direct quotes and period clothing.

“It’s so moving to see you again,” said one woman to Hartley after watching him play FDR. “I’m always pleased when I play real people and people really feel they saw that person come back to life,” said Hartley. One large contributing factor in making FDR

come to life is the research Hartley does before stepping into the role. He studies vocal patterns and physical movements as well as speeches and historical context.

In addition to performing the show, Hartley allows for questions afterwards. The show entertains and teaches. It displays perseverance and strength in the face of adversity, not only due to the poor economic climate of the time, but also as a result of a physical disability. Revisiting the New Deal seems important in a time when the American economy has dipped into another great recession.

Audiences of all ages have seen and enjoyed these shows, as they are designed for accessibility. Each show runs about 45 minutes and includes an information session afterwards. Theatre at KI has welcomed shows for several years and adds to its entertainment and educational programs with these two Neill Hartley shows.

“People love getting caught up in a good story,” says Hartley. “That’s the enjoyment of storytelling.”

Neill Hartley will be performing “FDR — a New Deal for America” Saturday, April 18, & “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” Sunday, April 19, at Theatre at KI,