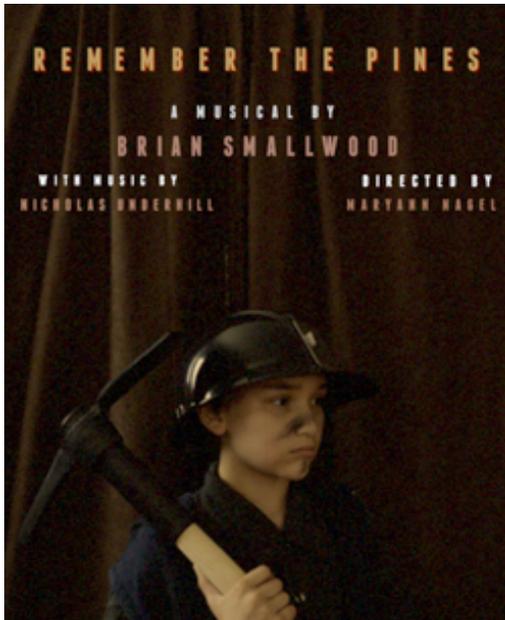


**Smallwood & Underhill's musical, *Remember the Pines*,
to premiere at Shore Cultural Center from October 3**

by Mike Telin



“I first read the novel back in 1992 when I was living in Los Angeles. And right away I started thinking that it could make a great musical,” award-winning Northeast Ohio poet and playwright Brian Smallwood recalled during a telephone conversation. The novel Smallwood is referring to, *Germinal*, by French novelist Émile Zola, graphically portrays the dismal lives of coal miners and their families during the mid-1800s. It also struck a personal chord with Smallwood. “As I was thinking about it, I started gathering historical data from a mining disaster that one of my family members was involved in back in 1940.”

This week Smallwood’s story, featuring music composed by Nicholas Underhill, will be brought to life at the Shore Cultural Center in Cleveland on Friday, October 3 beginning at 7:30 pm, with additional performances on October 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12 (Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 pm, Sundays at 2:00 pm). *Remember the Pines* is an original musical loosely based on Zola’s novel and Smallwood’s family history that depicts class struggles in a West Virginia mining town.

[*Remember the Pines*](#) tells the story of struggling mining families – the work is hard and dangerous with little pay. To make matters worse, the manager of the Company Store uses his position to, among other things, gain sexual favors from the town women in exchange for loaves of bread. Then one day, Luther Mullins (performed by Andrew Lipian) comes to town and quietly exerts his influence on the miners. The tensions between labor and management build until the inevitable takes place.

While writing the story, Smallwood called upon his own family’s oral history for plot lines. Additional research led him to the West Virginia Historical Archives. “The musical’s plot really is a mixture of three things: Zola’s story line, historical data from the 1940 mine disaster, and family stories. I received a lot of information about the

circumstances of the accident—the fatalities, as well as the names of people who were involved in the community.”

Composer Nicholas Underhill recalled the first time he saw Smallwood’s script. “At the time, it was more like an epic poem than a set of lyrics. So I took Brian’s poetry and worked with it, turning speech rhythms into melodies, and in the end it’s about 90% singing and 10% dialogue.” Because of the musical’s geographical setting, it was important to include various musical styles such as Bluegrass and Gospel in the score. “But the text even required a quote from Beethoven’s *Für Elise*,” Underhill said. A 12-player ensemble conducted by Ty Alan Emerson includes mandolin, banjo guitar, fiddle and bass in addition to classical strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion.

Both Smallwood and Underhill credit the show’s director, Maryann Nagel, for thoughtfully and graciously pulling everything together. “Maryann is just a beautiful person and a great director, and she brings so much energy to the show,” said Smallwood. “And,” Underhill added, “she’s very good at reminding us that everything needs to work onstage as well. As beautiful as the show is, it wouldn’t hold the audience’s attention if it wasn’t crafted properly.”

Underhill thinks that Trad Burns has come up with an intriguing set design. “The musicians are seated on a slightly elevated platform, and in between them is the entrance to the mine. So the actors are coming up out of the darkness into the light in between the musicians who will be interactive as members of the community.”

How long has Brian Smallwood been working on his first musical? “Technically I started writing it back in the 1990s, but it was in 2001 that I really sat down and said OK, Act I Scene I.”

Although Underhill said that he wrote most of the music in one year, the entire process of bringing *Remember the Pines* to the stage has taken about five. “The editing process has been long and slow, but collaboration takes time.”

And what led Smallwood and Underhill to decide to collaborate? “Brian is a tennis pro at Cleveland Racquet Club, and he was giving a clinic at our neighborhood park. We started talking and he asked me what I do, and I told him that I am a composer and pianist. Brian said, well I have a musical that I have been trying to get set to music for years. I told him I could do that, because writing a musical has always interested me.” The rest is history.

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