



INTERVIEWS NEWS OFF-BROADWAY THEATRE

INTERVIEW: 'Honorable Herbert Peabody' to have off-Broadway premiere this week

February 26, 2022 John Soltes 0 Comments Kirk McGee

Photo: Kirk McGee is the writer and star of The Honorable Herbert Peabody. Photo courtesy of the artist / Provided by Richard Hillman PR with permission.

The Honorable Herbert Peabody, the show written by and starring Kirk McGee, [will kick off a four-day run Wednesday, March 2 at the Chain Theatre on West 36th Street in New York City.](#) The play, directed and developed by Corey Atkins, follows a tour guide named Joe who must explain the legacy of Sen. Herbert Peabody at the library that bears his name. Where this tour guide trips up is in explaining the sex scandals that recently came to light about the dishonorable Peabody.

For the play, McGee draws inspiration from the #MeToo movement and his own family's political legacy. His grandfather was a U.S. senator from Wyoming for 18 years, and don't worry his reputation remains "untarnished," according to press notes. Also hovering in the background of the play is the prospects of a Donald Trump presidential library and whether they will cover such topics as the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape.

Recently *Hollywood Soapbox* exchanged emails with McGee about *The Honorable Herbert Peabody*. The successful performer has appeared in a wide variety of shows, everything from *Summer '69* to *Cris Angel: Mindfreak*. He has also performed at the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, StageWorks Hudson and the Cherry Lane Theatre. Questions and answers have been slightly edited for style.

What inspired the creation of this play?

The inspiration in creating *The Honorable Herbert Peabody* came during the zeitgeist of the #MeToo movement. In 2018, like so many other individuals, I was struggling to answer three essential questions. First and foremost: “How can I do better?” I began to explore the dynamics of abuse of power and the implications of absolving or ignoring misconduct simply because the perpetrator is our favorite celebrity, teacher, close friend or relative. And as politicians, entertainers and other powerful men were finally being held accountable for their inappropriate actions, it led to my second question: “Whether the deplorable personal behavior of these idols would impact how I feel about the legacy of their work?”

I wrestled with what it meant to simultaneously revere the achievements of men like Bill Cosby and revile their personal behavior. Coincidentally, during this time, a biography was published about my grandfather, former U.S. Sen. Gale McGee — the last Democrat to serve Wyoming in the Senate. His untarnished legacy (thank God!) as both a senator and later as OAS ambassador [Organization of American States] was that of a leader who could debate the most divisive issues honestly and respectfully with the belief that we were strongest when we serviced those in need of help.

The majority of the research for the book came from the Gale McGee Papers archived at the American Heritage Center, which led me to my third essential question of 2018: “What will the inevitable presidential library of the, then, newly elected Sexual-Predator-in-Chief, Donald Trump, be like?” The absurd imagery of that monument inspired *The Honorable Herbert Peabody* to answer the riddle: “How [can] a hapless tour guide juggle the senator’s lofty legacy with his litany of sex scandals?”

Was it always your intention to also act in the piece?

I consider myself an actor/performer first and a playwright second. Initially, writing was just a way to keep creative in between booking acting jobs. It soon evolved into a way to collaborate on original works with other artists, whether one-acts, sketches, screenplays or full-length plays. Although I have never thought of myself as a solo artist, I have been cast in solo shows written by other playwrights.

The Honorable Herbert Peabody is the first one I’ve written. I was always encouraged to create a solo show in the same vein as the great Bill Irwin because of my background in clowning and mime. I could never decide on an engaging narrative to tie all the clowning bits and scenes together. And if I was to create a solo show, it had to have more of a purpose than “hey, look how funny, talented, and *brave* I am.” When the inspiration for *Peabody* came around, there was

obviously a compelling narrative there, and it just seemed like a solo piece was the right way to present it.

What kind of commentary do you think the piece offers on the current state of politics, society and the country?

I have been very aware that I am a straight white male performing a #MeToo comedy, and so I have felt that the purpose of the play is to offer an evening of theater where the audience is drawn closer together and encouraged to participate in an open and honest dialogue about eliminating social and gender inequality. And I believe the audience has embraced that intention from as far back as when I first performed *Peabody* during the week of the Supreme Court Hearing of Brett Kavanaugh.

I'm not going to lie; I was a little scared and very nervous, but what was more gratifying than how much the audience loved it, was how the talkback afterward evolved from further developing the play to addressing the systems of abuse. And the more we perform *The Honorable Herbert Peabody*, the more I hope we can build on that.

The most challenging aspect of the play has been creating an ending that will evolve with the changing times. If I was writing about the Civil War or Watergate, we know how those events ended and their lessons. But we don't really know, yet, what the result of the #MeToo movement will be yet because we are still grappling with what the #MeToo movement has uncovered. As a result, the play's original ending that worked in 2018 no longer works because history is still in progress. What Corey and I have come up with at the end I believe can and will evolve with the narrative of the changing times. I suppose the commentary offered by *The Honorable Herbert Peabody* is the reality that the systematic abuse of power, unfortunately, isn't over and won't be until we take the time to reflect on our own actions and discuss how we can end it together.

What's it like working with Corey Atkins?

I am forever grateful that Corey accepted to collaborate with me on *The Honorable Herbert Peabody*. Corey, first and foremost, is a kind soul who happens to be an extremely talented, creative and astute director. We share a love for good storytelling above anything else. And there is no better feeling than the trust between actor and director, and I cherish the one I have with Corey. It makes taking risks easier both on stage and on the page. I think we complement each other very well because we both respect that the other has worn many hats in his theatrical life and brings those experiences into the work. I really enjoy putting all the puzzle pieces of the production together with him. Plus, like me, he loves a good pun!

Do you hope for a life beyond this limited engagement at the Chain Theatre?

With compassion and humor, *The Honorable Herbert Peabody* inspires its audience to participate in an open and honest dialogue about creating a culture shift regarding eliminating social and gender inequality by emphasizing the power of our individual action over legacy. The goal of *The Honorable Herbert Peabody* has always been to bring its essential themes and

conversations to theatres, colleges and universities across the country, and ultimately as a Netflix special at one of the incredible theaters in Washington, D.C. And with the support from The Cafe Royal Cultural Foundation Performance Grant and several individual donations, this production at the Chain Theatre will serve as a launchpad toward our goal.

Do acting and writing flex the same creative muscles?

The simple answer is there is a great deal of overlapping, for sure. The trick, I've learned, is to trust the words on the page once you get it on its feet and then have the discipline to change the words if it proves to no longer tell the story. The only thing that remains constant, whether I'm writing or acting, is the principal foundation of creating funny, loose-limbed, live theatrical performances that aspire to speak to the very survival of the human spirit. They are driven by characters whose distinct points of view are challenged by extreme adversity.

However, instead of fearless heroes conquering the world, I present fallible fools who attempt to preserve their dignity while desperately struggling to overcome insurmountable circumstances. This serves to heighten the humor to show that our flaws, follies and blunders unite us rather than divide us. I always have a secret wish that after the show, perhaps over drinks, the audience debates over the thought-provoking questions, recounts the comedic twists, laughs their socks off at zippy lines, and all the while declaring, quote: "That was hysterical. I learned something about myself and feel inspired to change the world. ... But, where are my socks?"

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

The Honorable Herbert Peabody, written by and starring Kirk McGee, will play a four-day engagement starting Wednesday, March 2 at the Chain Theatre in New York City. Click [here](#) for more information and tickets.



John Soltes

John Soltes is an award-winning journalist. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, Earth Island Journal, The Hollywood Reporter, New Jersey Monthly and at Time.com, among other publications. E-mail him at john@hollywoodsoapbox.com