

TO THE SEA

A Theatrical Exploration of the Human Relationship with Water

BY BRADLEY AKERS

Associate Director at Players by the Sea



"Swimming is a constant in my life. It is the source of my energy. Being in the water. Swimming for miles. It's my mediation and fuels of creativity. The fruit of which is nourished by water."

For Jim Alabiso, the water is not just a beautiful entity that represents spirituality or re-birth. It is his life--a place where he finds comfort, joy and a sense of belonging. Jim's colorful oceanside photographs that surface on social media several times a week toast his adventures and passion with three words: "To the Sea".

Alabiso has joyfully spent many years telling his stories in pieces. "The stories would come up in coffee shops, dinner conversations, walks by the river and on the beach," says Alabiso, adding that he had been "approached by a few folks about putting [his stories] out there but the venues just weren't appropriate." The story is a personal journey, but Alabiso is more interested in the message being about water.

Alabiso's social media postings and love for water sparked the interest of Joe Schwarz, Executive Director of Players by the Sea.

"We started to share our passion for the ocean and the aquatic ecosystem that embodies all of us," says Schwarz. "My personal experience with Pete Seeger's Clearwater Project that saved the Hudson River and Jim's love of the St. Johns River sparked many conversations, including the decision to tell this story through theatre." It, of course, came as no surprise for Players by the Sea to embark on this project as a theatre that commits itself to producing new work. Schwarz says that "new work is the lifeblood of theatre, giving a voice to new playwrights and engaging our community in discussion."

It was an artistic match that the universe beckoned for. The next step: finding the right playwright. Jacksonville is fortunate to have a community of talented writers that dedicate themselves to bringing a story to life onstage. After a carefully conducted process of interviews, the perfect playwright match for this story was Kelby Siddons. Siddons, a teacher at Episcopal School of Jacksonville, has found great success in Jacksonville telling stories.

"For me, Jacksonville tends to have a small town feeling with increasingly big town capabilities, which is a great formula for creative collaborations," says Siddons, who regularly contributes to Swamp Radio and enjoyed a successful run of her play *War Paint* by the Players by the Sea School of the Arts. She describes being compelled to tell this story because of "Jim's enthusiasm, clarity and insight in stories from all chapters of his life."

The piece is produced by Players by the Sea and the Cummer Museum of Arts & Gardens, where the show will take place on October 21st. The long relationship of bringing new and inspirational work by Players by the Sea and the Cummer paved the way for this special piece. With 2015 being the Year of the River in Jacksonville and the upcoming closing of the Cummer's "Reflections: Artful Perspective on the St. Johns River" exhibit, *To the Sea* marks itself as an important and relevant story to tell.

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"By bringing people together for a live performance on the banks of the St. Johns River for stories of the human relationship to water, we're hoping to reconnect with the ancient nowness of nature, to honor it, and take better care of it," says Siddons. One can describe *To the Sea* as an inspirational testament to the healing and vital powers of water, that of which affects our daily lives. Both Alabiso and director Jason Collins recognize this project as one that will hopefully leave audiences with the appreciation of nature.

"I want the audience to [have an] appreciation of the aspects of our Earth [because] we only get one," says Collins. Collins's artful direction of the pieces matches the life of Alabiso beautifully with the text that Siddons created in an effort to guide the cast of three skillful actors to a moving performance. The cast includes David Gile as the Swimmer, Ricky Watson as the Man and Ben Ketchum as the Boy.

To the Sea will be performed on October 21st at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens along the banks of the St. Johns River. Collins's direction features an audience seating style of in the round, matching the concept of constant movement and flow to that of water's natural state. The doors will open at 6pm for patrons to enjoy the museum and galleries, as well as wine and cheese pre-reception. The show starts at 7pm, and there will be a talk back with the cast and crew at 8pm.

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