

Homecoming Kings

Auburn alumni Thom Gossom Jr. and Michael O’Neill bring their new play, *Alabama Boys*, to the Woltosz Theatre

BY John Seitz

Auburn alumni Thom Gossom Jr. and Michael O’Neill have both traveled long, improbable paths from their respective Alabama hometowns—journeys that eventually landed them in Hollywood, living lives neither could have predicted in their wildest dreams.

In their new original play, *Alabama Boys*, written and directed by Gossom and O’Neill, the Auburn alums reminisce on this journey in an autobiographical, roots-to-branches retrospective that follows them from their Alabama childhoods and matriculation at Auburn University to eventual odds-defying careers as working actors in film and television.

The play is the first-ever original theatrical production presented by the Jay and Susie Gogue Performing Arts Center at Auburn University. Produced by fellow Auburn alumnus Walt Woltosz, *Alabama Boys* divides Gossom and O’Neill’s twin story arcs into three distinct acts: growing up in segregated 1960s Alabama during the civil rights era; the formative experiences of college life at Auburn University; and the whirlwind of hard-won successes achieved as stage and screen actors.

“It’s a story about our childhoods in the South, but also about how Thom and I came from towns in Alabama and moved to Hollywood and made our way against, really, insurmountable odds,” O’Neill says.

Alabama Boys is a tale that both men felt strongly needed to be told. The script was written primarily by Gossom, with extensive input from O’Neill.

“The arc of Thom’s journey, the mythology of it, it’s a heroic journey,” says O’Neill. “I felt if our play didn’t include that story, we’d miss the mark.”



Auburn alumni Thom Gossom Jr. (left) and Michael O’Neill (right) rehearse a scene from *Alabama Boys*. The play will debut at the Woltosz Theatre on Wednesday, October 26, 2022.

Close friends for many years, Gossom and O’Neill had been looking to collaborate on a project like *Alabama Boys* for some time. A suggestion from former Auburn University President Dr. Jay Gogue provided the impetus, and opportunity, to finally realize their artistic goal.

“I was doing some projects for Dr. Gogue around 2018 and 2019,” says Gossom. “He said to me, ‘We’re opening this new performing arts center and I think it would be a good idea if we had performances that featured some of our own [Auburn] talent.’ So, in a way, the genesis of this play comes from Dr. Gogue.”

“Yeah, they can blame Dr. Gogue for this,” O’Neill adds jokingly.

Levity aside, O’Neill views the performance space of the Woltosz Theatre as an unmatched venue to debut their new work.

“The Gogue Center is unlike anything else,” he says. “And we’ve both played in some great houses. But this theater in Auburn is incomparable, soup to nuts.”

Alabama Boys places Gossom and O’Neill front and center for the duration of the 90-minute performance. The action of the play—framed by a sparse, affecting stage design—transitions from nostalgic, humor-laden conversations to serious discussions on segregation and political activism and the travails and triumphs of life in the entertainment industry. Both actors also perform favorite scenes and soliloquies significant to their personal lives, including works by Mark Twain and August Wilson and a dramatic reading of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Gossom expects the play will show audiences aspects of Alabama, Auburn and Hollywood of which they may not have been previously aware.

“I hope it will be a revelation for some people,” Gossom says. “Some may already know about it. But hopefully more people will learn something and have a lot of fun.”

Opening with a loving overture to the culture and history of their home state, *Alabama Boys* then delves into life as it was for both characters as children in the time of segregation. The first act expresses a clear, abiding affection for Alabama, albeit one tinged with feelings of regret and frustration.

“I think of it in terms of a love affair,” Gossom says. “You know, like a real, grown-up love affair. You can love something and not agree with everything that happened.”

The characters move from their early years in Birmingham and Montgomery to the Auburn University campus of the early 1970s. Gossom becomes a star receiver for a series of successful Auburn teams, most notably 1972’s “Amazins”; O’Neill joins a fraternity, pursues a degree in economics, and ponders his next steps in life.

As they move into their adult years, their acting careers develop in a somewhat unexpected, haphazard fashion. But through their perseverance and talent, both men establish themselves as regular, working actors, with decades-long résumés of television and film credits and collaborations with a who’s-who of Hollywood’s elite to show for it.

“The play takes the audience on a long journey,” says Gossom. “Just like anyone’s actual life, some of it isn’t comfortable—but in the end, the audience will enjoy the trip.”

During much of their time at Auburn, the idea of a career in showbusiness was often the furthest thing from the minds of Gossom and O’Neill; however, a class in oral interpretation taught by Auburn professor and dramatist Dr. Robert Overstreet helped to stir an interest in theatre for both men.

“The experience did something for me in that it made me feel like I wasn’t just boxed in to being a football player,” Gossom says. “I loved playing football, but I was always interested in doing more than that for my growth.”

“Dr. Overstreet was a remarkable interpreter of poetry,” O’Neill says. “It was no longer that stuff in high school where it had to rhyme—it was life. And it created an appetite in me to want to be able to do that.”

Following their time at Auburn, the two men’s lives took long and sometimes circuitous routes to eventual onscreen success in Tinseltown.

After becoming the first African American athlete to ever graduate from Auburn, Gossom briefly played for the Birmingham Vulcans in the World Football League. From there, he moved into television news, working for Channel 42 in Birmingham, where his full love for acting began to emerge.

“In Birmingham in the 1970s, there were no theaters for black actors to perform,” Gossom says. “UAB Town & Gown [theater] set up a workshop for people who had an interest in acting, and I started going every Thursday.”

The weekly acting classes planted the seeds for Gossom’s stage and film ambitions. He began accumulating theatrical experience in church productions and further honed his skills reciting the works of famed poets like Langston Hughes in area schools.

His big break came in 1981, when he landed the role of Ted Marcus on the NBC series *In the Heat of the Night*. The show spring boarded his acting career, launching him into regular film, television and stage work for the next several decades, including acting credits on network shows like *Boston Legal*, *ER*, *CSI*, and *The West Wing*, films *Fight Club*, *Jeepers Creepers 2* and *Miss Evers’ Boys*, and theatrical productions of *American Buffalo*, *Fences* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

O’Neill’s beginnings in showbusiness were no less improbable.

“I graduated with a degree in economics, but I didn’t know what to do with an economics degree,” O’Neill says. “A character actor in Los Angeles named Will Geer said to me, ‘Son, I think you should try acting before the corporate structure snatches you up. Come to California and find out.’ I was literally unencumbered by anything, and I wanted to get out into the world. I didn’t go there to be an actor so much as I wanted to find out if I could survive. I couldn’t read well as a kid. I stammered. I wasn’t well suited to an acting or an audition process—I had to learn how to do all of that.”

O’Neill suggests that what may have propelled his drive to become an actor was a characteristic healthy stubbornness.

“In the interim, I had people telling me, ‘You won’t make it.’ You say that to me long enough, and it’ll want to make me prove myself that much more and say, ‘I’ll show you.’”

And O’Neill has been showing everyone now for decades. Highlights from his long, accomplished career include the films *Dallas Buyer’s Club*, *Lorenzo’s Oil*, *Seabiscuit*, *Traffic* and *Transformers*; iconic television shows *ER*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *NCIS*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *The X-Files*; and his portrayal of Ron Butterfield on *The West Wing*.

In addition to an innate determination, O’Neill also credits his Auburn University education as resource for navigating the acting world.

“Auburn instilled in me something that allowed me to survive the rejection of the entertainment industry,” O’Neill says.

The odds of breaking into Hollywood as an aspiring, unknown actor are impossibly long. One has to battle against a sea of hungry, talented competing actors for a trickle of available roles—and nepotism adds considerable disadvantages.

“You’re up against people who grew up inside Hollywood,” O’Neill says. “They’re connected, and they know how the mechanisms of the business work, so they’re not intimidated by it. You also have to contend with groups of people who came out of places like Yale and Carnegie Mellon and Northwestern who already have networks through their alumni associations.”

“I think that’s a great way to put it,” Gossom says. “They came with a community, and we didn’t come with a community. We came as solo individuals.”

But against these astoundingly long odds, Gossom and O’Neil prevailed, carving niches for themselves in one of the most competitive industries in the world and forging their own professional communities among some of Hollywood’s most revered artists.

Still, after years of being well aware of who each other was, Gossom and O’Neill had never officially met face to face.

“We’d been circling each other for years,” O’Neill says.

It wasn’t until 1997, at a party in Santa Monica, where the two were finally introduced by a mutual friend, the Academy Award-nominated actress Alfre Woodard.

“Alfre was instrumental,” Gossom says. “She helped draw us together. The play wouldn’t have happened the way it did without her.”

Alabama Boys becomes the keystone merging the story arcs of the two actors’ lives—in the play as well as in life. Moving through life in uncannily parallel directions, it is fitting that when the two actors finally collaborated, it was to craft a play named for, and performed in, the state from which their remarkable journeys originated.

Alabama Boys premieres Wednesday, October 26 and Thursday, October 27 at 7:30 p.m. in the Woltosz Theatre. Tickets for both performances are available for \$35 and can be purchased at goguecentertickets.auburn.edu or by contacting the Gogue Center box office at 334.844.8497 (TIXS) or gpactickets@auburn.edu.

In celebration of the world premiere of *Alabama Boys*, the Gogue Center is pleased to offer students, alumni, faculty and staff a special Auburn Family discount on tickets. Auburn students can secure up to two free tickets, while alumni, faculty and staff can book two tickets for \$20 each. To reserve seats, visit goguecentertickets.auburn.edu and enter promotional code **AUFAMILY**.