

THE BEACON HILL TIMES

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Tom O'Neill talks about 'According to Tip'

by Sheila Barth

When I asked Tom O'Neill by telephone whether he enjoyed seeing the play about his dad, "According to Tip," that appeared recently at Arsenal Center for the Arts in Watertown and is heading to Stuart Street Playhouse, Boston, in October his voice brightened. "It was a genuine reminder of my dad It was terrific," he beamed.

The one-man play written by award-winning author Dick Flavin, who worked for years with Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., longtime colorful, famous politician from Cambridge who died January 5, 1994, delighted audiences, leaving them wanting more. Others were disappointed they missed it – people who had worked with O'Neill in Congress, in his state offices, or grew up hearing wonderful stories about his accomplishments. One night, about 100 members of the O'Neill family, including son Thomas P. "Tom" O'Neill III, attended the show, and were mesmerized by actor Ken Howard's realistic portrayal.

"It was a very eerie feeling," says Tom O'Neill. "In the opening scene, when he [actor Ken Howard] turns around in the chair, he looks just like my dad. It was eerie." Apparently, Tom's sister Rosemary agreed. When Ken as Tip first turns and walks from the desk, she said she was welling up, tearing up. "It's like seeing my father brought back to life. It's almost scary," she told producer Paul Boghosian, owner-president of HarborSide Films Faneuil Market in Boston.

Tom O'Neill, head of public relations-government affairs firm, O'Neill and Associates in Boston, has followed in his prestigious dad's footsteps politically. While Tip O'Neill broke the party barrier in Massachusetts as the first Democrat to serve as speaker of the state House of Representatives and later in Congress, Tom served as lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts from 1975 to 1983; created and administered the Office of Federal-State Relations in Boston and Washington, D.C. and served on the U.S. State Department Ambassadorial Screening Committee and in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

O'Neill sits on the Board of Trustees for Boston College and chairs the Board of Trustees for North Cambridge Catholic High School, having graduated from both, received his bachelor's degree from Boston College and his master's in public administration from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, a school that his dad laughingly said he was allowed to enter– but not as a student.

For Tom O'Neill, seeing his father portrayed on stage was sheer joy. It was as though the immortal Tip were resurrected. "It did all of that, and even more. I didn't want Ken Howard to leave the stage. I thought he was great," says Tom. "Ken Howard's portrayal was wonderful."

O'Neill says author Dick Flavin did a meticulous job presenting not only several incidents and facts, but capturing his dad's personality. "I couldn't be happier for Flavin the writer and Howard the actor," he says, referring to the play's success in Watertown, and latest booking at the Stuart Street Playhouse from October to January. "It's all true. The family feels genuinely grateful [for Flavin and Howard's work]. The incidents of the family were very telling and pretty accurate, especially about my brother. I thought they did a great job....." O'Neill says, referring to his brother Michael's losing battle with substance abuse, over which his father anguished and blamed himself in the play. Tip was remorseful about not being home in Cambridge enough to raise his five children, coming home only on weekends, while he served in Congress, in Washington DC, for 20 years. However, Tom says his father had no reason to blame himself for anything. His brother and sister lived in Washington, close to their dad.

"He was a great guy," he says. "I don't remember my dad being around less. We saw him every weekend; he played ball with us, took us bowling; we went to church as a family. I think what he feels or felt most deeply about was being unable to solve my brother's problems.

"Michael was in his 20s and 30s, and my dad felt some responsibility for him, but Michael had issues," Tom says.

O'Neill says Flavin called him frequently while writing the play. "I talked to Dick 20 times over the life of the play and saw it in its original form," he says. O'Neill was also moved when Ken Howard called to say he was portraying Tip.

"Ken Howard was nice enough to call me and wanted a nod of approval," says O'Neill, and after watching Howard on stage, O'Neill was elated. "His work was terrific. He couldn't be more gracious," he says.

Besides showing Tip O'Neill's human and family side, the play highlights his growth in the transitioning Mass. State-house, from a firm Republican grip to a Democratic stronghold, and his rapid rise in the US House of Representatives, including arguments with presidents Nixon, Carter and Reagan. Howard also mastered O'Neill's mannerisms, his easy, offhand dismissals of people and issues, his breezy way of telling a fine tale, his lumbered gait, catchy chuckle, and his jarring truthfulness.

"I think people are looking for his heart, and we should reveal his heart," Howard told me. "We know about his blarney and the songs he sang, but what was in his heart, what was he all about? What worried him, etc.?"

"At the end, I want people to feel what made the measure of the man. I'm trying to imitate the man - sure I am. In the first part of the play, the audience has to go with the man, the look, etc. In shows like this, it has to be moment to moment, sharing the highs and lows...."

Tom O'Neill thinks Flavin, Howard and director Rick Lombardo succeeded here. "I think they all shared the same feeling, the warmth, the ability to get it, to capture the personality - the act that it was a metaphor for Americans' century of politics - and the portrayal was great," says O'Neill. "I thought it was a lot of fun, and in this political season, I think people will get a kick out of it. It's wonderful entertainment."