

Screenwriter

During the past 30 years, screenwriter John Arends of St. Charles has gotten to know fellow Iowa State University student Jack Trice better with each decade.

However, the two haven't met, and never will. Trice, the first black man to play for the university's football team, lived and died before Arends was born. But the bond is clear when Arends, who has written an award-winning screenplay about Trice, quotes a letter Trice wrote the night before his first, and only, game in 1923: "The honor of my race, family and self are at stake. Everyone is expecting me to do big things. I will!"

Trice's words foreshadowed his fate: He died from injuries suffered during the game and his sacrifice inspired Iowa State students, including Arends, to engage in a 20-year battle to have the university's stadium named in Trice's honor.

The drama will unfold when Arends's screenplay, "Trice," is presented 7:30 p.m. Sept. 15 at Theater Wit in Chicago. Beyond actors reciting scripts accompanied by a narrator, "Trice" will feature sound effects, visual projections and choreography of actual football plays.

"I take the point of view that his injuries were intentional," Arends said. "During the opening kickoff, he broke his collarbone, but he stayed in the game. There are reports of players piling on. He suffered a broken collar bone, a ruptured stomach and a collapsed lung...He was battling not just for the game, but for the right to be there. The truth is, a black man took the field and he was killed."

Arends, a La Grange, IL native who received his bachelor's degree from Iowa State, was first inspired to write about Trice when he returned to the university on a creative writing fellowship in the late 1970s.

"His legacy and what happened in 1923 became a major cause on campus in the late 1970s. It was taking on a life of its own," Arends said. Back then, university officials would not heed students' requests to name the university's new stadium after Trice, and the structure stood nameless for a while. Eventually, it was officially dubbed Cyclone Stadium/Jack Trice Field, but enduring protests brought results -- the entire structure was renamed Jack Trice Stadium in 1997.

"It was my goal with the screenplay to get out of the way and just let Jack's story ride," Arends said. This took several drafts; at one point, Arends worked with Hollywood film producers to develop a screenplay on the student movement surrounding the stadium naming, but that project never reached audiences.

“My hobby, when I’m not working, is to write,” said Arends, who also is a principal at Arends, his family’s advertising firm in Batavia. “About five years ago, I decided to get professional about it. In winter 2009, I started writing the Jack Trice piece I wanted to see and I wrote it in two months.”

He submitted it to the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting competition, sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The screenplay made it through 11 rounds of judging to make the top 30 out of more than 6,000 submitted scripts.

Arends also submitted the screenplay to Chicago ScriptWorks, a non-profit group that chooses several screenplays to be read in productions each year.

“I felt it was an important story that needed to be shared with others,” said Vera Brooks, co-founder and executive director of Chicago ScriptWorks. “The details, the arc of the characters -- not only Trice but of his coach and his teammates -- needs to be told on the stage, but also on the screen someday, too. It is inspirational.”

Nich Radcliffe, who is directing the Sept. 15 production of “Trice,” felt an “instant connection” with the story when Brooks explained it to him.

“I said, ‘Vera, you know I grew up two hours from Iowa State, right?’” Radcliffe recounted. “I’d never heard the story... I read the script and I cried at three different places. I said, ‘Dear God in heaven, yes, I want to do this.’ I’ve directed something like 40 shows and I firmly believe we can change the world, one show at a time. When I read this screenplay, that’s what I saw. (Arends) was part of the movement that got the name of the stadium changed. That shows in his writing.”

One of Radcliffe’s favorite lines from the screenplay is written from the perspective of Trice’s mother, who spoke to the coach who was moving her son from his native Ohio to play football in Iowa.

“She says, ‘God made my son a good man and you made my son a football player. Between you and God, I’m feeling outnumbered,’” Radcliffe said. “He writes lines like that that are so good, you swear you’ve heard them before, so you look and look and look for them, and you can’t find them anywhere else. They’re John’s.”

Radcliffe and Arends sought the assistance of a stage combat expert to guide them through the football game simulations.

“I know it’s fake when the actors throw an elbow, but I can’t believe how real it looks and sounds,” Arends said. “Jack Trice was very much a foot soldier in the battle for equality. The power of the story is that he’s a hero for the ages. I wish people could meet him through the story.”