

Monica McDaniel stages a play inspired by addiction issues in her community

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Alli Marshall

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Sometimes the idea for a piece of writing arrives late at night, and local poet, novelist and playwright **Monica McDaniel** tells herself she'll remember, "but the next day it's gone," she says. "But [God] gave me the vision for this play two years ago, and it never left," she continues. When people at her church approached her about staging a production, she already had the concept in mind.

"And here we are," she says.

The Nov. 4 launch of McDaniel's latest play, *Left Behind*, was a celebratory affair. A crowd packed the Dr. Wesley Grant Sr. Southside Center (named for McDaniel's grandfather). In the lobby, vendors sold jewelry, makeup and cupcakes. Heaping plates of food from J. Lee's Chicken Shack were available during intermission. It felt like a party.

Those who missed that auspicious opening can catch an encore performance at the Jewish Community Center on Saturday, Dec. 9.

McDaniel, who grew up in Asheville, has figured out not only how to find an audience for her range of creative works, but also how to involve her community. Some members of the cast of *Left Behind* — which includes **Ki'era Gash, Kia Rice, Zina Bristol, James Raysean Love, Tifphanie Darity, Donovan Johnson, Imani Gibbs** and **A-iah McDaniel** — are also active in the New Birth Church of Asheville. Wisely, McDaniel harnessed the talents of star singers, spelling the play's scenes with musical interludes and furthering the narrative through gospel songs.

The story for the play — which centers on a woman named Logan who struggles with addiction — also hits close to home. “Heroin has been an epidemic in my community for a long time,” says McDaniel. “Now it has a new face, and a lot more people are getting addicted to it, so it's been a topic of discussion.”

At the beginning of the play, a desperate Logan leaves her two daughters with their grandmother. Later, Logan returns to find everything has changed, and she has secrets of her own that she must decide whether to share. “It's real,” says McDaniel. “I feel like people will be able to relate to it.”

She put the play on paper in August and made some tweaks based on feedback from her cast. There's a definite sense that the actors are fully committed, from Love's energetic portrayal of a preacher and Johnson's swaggering uncle/family friend-figure to Gash's haunting vocal solo and the onstage sisterly bond of Rice and Darity.

McDaniel staged her first play — *The Many Personalities of the Soul...*, based on her 2012 collection of poetry, *The Soul of a Poet* — at Asheville Community Theatre a few years ago. To turn out that and other works, she created her own company, Winnies Child Productions, named for her late mother. “One day, I started writing, and I've been writing ever since,” McDaniel says. “My mom was my biggest supporter — she'd read it and say, ‘Wow, you really need to write a book.’” Sadly, most of McDaniel's publications came after her mother passed away.

But the writer sees the positive side of her accomplishments. “Why not have your own production company? Why not be independent?” she asks. “If you have the business mind and know how to reach out and market to people, why not? The world is your oyster.”

McDaniel has published two books, including the 2014 poetry and short-story hybrid *Misty's Blues*, and is currently at work on a novel. “My community, the African-American community, has been supportive,” she says. “You have to build up your fan base — you have to leave your readers wanting more.”

While finding similar support beyond the African-American community has been a challenge, McDaniel maintains that her work is not intended exclusively for any one group. When a white co-worker asked if it was OK to attend *Left Behind*, the playwright was a little bit taken

aback. “I was like, ‘*Everyone* can come,’” she says. “It’s not a play for black people, it’s a play for *all* people.”

WHAT: *Left Behind*

WHERE: Jewish Community Center, 236 Charlotte St. jcc-asheville.org

WHEN: Saturday, Dec. 9, 4 p.m. \$12 at the door