

Local Tragedy Inspires 'Hereafter Musical'

By: Alex Biese



The December 2003 death in a car accident of Middletown teenager D.J. Wheeler left an impact on the life and career of Vinnie Favale that's still being felt in a profound way more than a decade later.

Favale, vice president of late night entertainment at CBS and a resident of Middletown's Lincroft neighborhood, wrote the song "Nineteen" in response to Wheeler's

passing, and as a reaction to a memorial tree in honor of Wheeler on Middletown-Lincroft Road where the 18-year-old had died.

It was an event with particular resonance in Favale's life, as two of his brothers died when he was a teenager — Frankie when he was 15, Johnny when he was 17.

"When people die, we put them in gated communities called cemeteries where they're out of sight," Favale said. "They're not out of mind to the person who lost them, but they're certainly out of mind to the general public. OK, when you drive randomly by a cemetery you think about it, but for the most part you're not aware that someone has died. And here, this memorial tree is more powerful than a cemetery because it's got the poetry and the flowers and the picture, but it also is in the location where it happened."

Working with a creative team that includes writing partner, co-creator and co-star Frankie Keane of Weehawken, Favale, as songwriter and executive producer, developed "Nineteen" into "Hereafter Musical."

After a number of New Jersey and New York stagings, and a campaign on crowdfunding website Kickstarter that raised over \$70,000, the show made its off-Broadway debut at New York City's Theater 80 in April 2012, followed by an encore run of performances in the fall of 2013.

"Hereafter Musical" is now back again as part of an open-ended run of Saturday matinees at the Snapple Theater on West 50th Street, with the next performance scheduled for Jan. 10.

"I still drive by the tree that started it all, that memorial tree, in amazement, like 'Oh my God, this random tragedy happened 11 years ago now and I'm still plugging away,'



"Favale said. "Now, this is the longest stretch we've done it. We've done it for like 15 weeks, and it's an amazing feeling, I'm very proud, and there's no way I could have done it on my own. There are literally 100 people who helped make this happen."

A musical drama, "Hereafter" looks at the aftermath of death from the perspective of both the living and the dead. Theatergoers, take note: the show is reportedly such a tear-jerker that during a previous run, Favale and the production team decided to provide tissues to attendees.

"When we did a workshop, there was a lot of commotion happening at a key part of the show," Favale said. "It was a commotion in the audience, and it was people fumbling. It was audible tears, and then people going through purses looking for tissues or something to wipe their tears away.

"So, we hit upon the idea. We said, 'It's kind of presumptuous to say that you might need tissues, so we won't really call any attention to it,' but during intermission we put a basket (of tissues) out on the table as you go into the theater. And, most people are hip to the fact because Act I has some of those moments. And I think it's like, 'I think I know why these are here' or (they would ask) 'Do I really need these?' and (we'd say) 'Probably not, they're just there as a courtesy.'

"And by the way," he added, "the theater's littered with tissues now. It's all true, and that's the best part."

HEREAFTER MUSICAL

WHEN: 4:45 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 10

WHERE: Snapple Theater, 210 West 50th St., New York City

TICKETS: \$75

ON THE WEB: For more information, visit <http://hereaftermusical.com/>.