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ENTERTAINMENT, LOCAL NEWS

'Riding for America' takes off at the Nathan Manilow Theatre

by Lolita Cusic — on June 11, 2025

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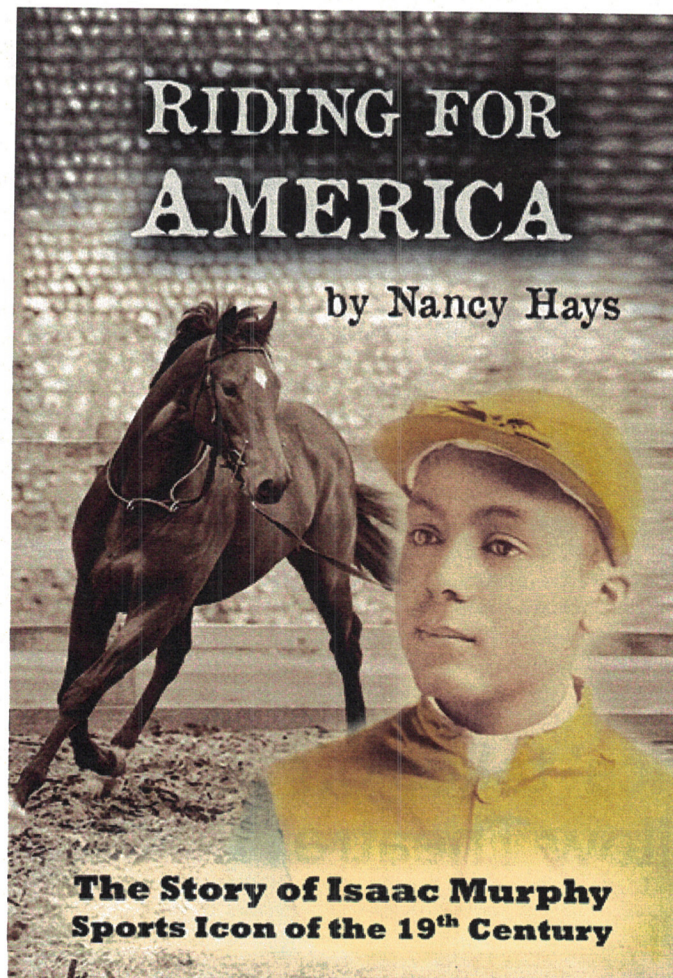
Lolita Cusic

Author

Nancy Hays was off to the races as soon as she heard Isaac Burns Murphy's story when she visited the Kentucky Derby Museum in 2019. Murphy, a famous African-American jockey in the late 1800s, had been reduced to a footnote in history.

Hays was appalled and determined to tell the world about Murphy.

"Isaac's story takes place at a very unique time in American history between the Civil War and after Emancipation when Black jockeys (most of whom were the sons of slaves) dominated the racetracks," Hays said.



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Nancy Hays was a key force in getting Isaac Murphy's story told. In addition to her extensive research, Hays has visited Murphy's grave site and his Mother, America's. (Provided photo)

During the pandemic, Hays read “The Prince of Jockeys: The Life of Isaac Burns Murphy,” written by the late author and former NFL player Pellom McDaniels III. In the book, McDaniels told Murphy’s story and explored the pivotal role Murphy’s mother, America, played in his career and the sacrifices she made.

“I’m a huge advocate for America Murphy,” Hays said. “As far as I’m concerned, with everything I’ve read about her, she’s a saint.”

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Isaac Murphy dominated the sport of horse racing during his short lifetime. He won the Kentucky Derby three times, the Latonia Derby five times and was a four-time winner of the prestigious American Derby, which was run in Chicago at Washington Park. Those are just a few of his wins. The media at the time called him “The Prince of Jockeys.”

Strasser, the show’s producer, was the catalyst for the new theatrical production. She is also the assistant cultural arts director at the Manilow theater. She met Hays last year. Hays, who is a singer, musician and businesswoman, was performing a best of Broadway show at the theater, Strasser said. The two talked and Hays told Strasser about Isaac Murphy. Strasser remembers that she was intrigued by the story.

Meanwhile, Hays already had commissioned her son Eddie Heffernan, who has a strong theater and film background, to write a script.

Hays also had connected with a group called Working in Concert, “a not-for-profit, performing arts incubator that facilitates collaborative projects in cabaret, opera and classical vocal arts, theatrical and popular song.”

The first production, presented at a school, was performed with one actor. Hays served as

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the narrator and sang and played original songs she'd written. The production was well-received, Hays said.

The way everyone came together and created the current project was serendipitous.

Strasser had applied for and was awarded a \$10,000 grant from the Illinois Arts Council.

In a full circle moment, when Working in Concert performed at her theater, Strasser mentioned Hays to them. Strasser had never forgotten her conversations with Hays. Strasser learned that Working in Concert already had a connection with Hays and knew about Isaac Murphy. It was then that Strasser realized she'd found the perfect project for her grant, a production about Isaac Burns Murphy.

"I think that this story and the content is something that young people would be interested in," Strasser said, who said they are also going to be creating a study guide. "It is such an engaging story.

Strasser, like Hays, feels that it's important to share this little known part of Black history.

Strasser said she was able to pull together an amazing team to tell Issac Murphy's story. She said they've rewritten the script, added video and photos to enhance the narrative, new

songs, lighting, props and more. The revised production is bigger and more compelling.

Jassma Pryor is an actress and writer who plays multiple roles in the play, including the role of America, Murphy's mother. Pryor also helped with the script. Actor Eldridge Shannon will play the role of Isaac Murphy and other roles. Stephan Mazurek is the project's cinematographer, photographer and production designer. Creator Nancy Hays will sing and perform original music. Strasser serves as the play's light designer, prop master and costumer as well as the producer.

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"He was really the Michael Jordan of his century," Hays said of Isaac Murphy. "It takes tremendous skill, bravery and athletic talent."

In addition to being a celebrity, Hays said that Murphy was a gentleman, who was known for his intellect, integrity and honesty. Hays has written a young adult novel about Murphy and his mother, adapted from a screenplay by Hays and Heffernan. The book is called "Riding for America" and should be available in September.

"Our story and the narrative in our book follows what Pellom wrote in his book," Hays said. "I really think I'm just a vessel. Somehow I just can't let this story not be told."

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In February 2026, Strasser said the theater will present the premiere performance of the finalized production of “Riding for America.” More details will be available soon. She also hopes to get it into schools.

Tickets for Thursday’s presentation are [free but need to be reserved](#). The production is recommended for anyone aged 11 and older.



Lolita Cusic

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