

# Making History



Franck Germain '18 (right), with Juan Mareco '18 (left) and Alex "Chiti" Tembo '18 (center) - photo by Andrew Shurtleff

## A STUDENT PLAYWRIGHT'S PERSPECTIVE ON DECATUR 404

by Hilde Keldermans

History was made at Blue Ridge School this February when senior Franck Germain's original musical was performed on the DeAngelis Stage.

Prior to this production, Franck's first experience in theater was three years ago when he was cast as Snoopy in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

Three years later, Franck is now a published playwright and composer thanks to the guidance and vision of several Blue Ridge School teachers who helped him write, produce and co-direct the School's winter musical *Decatur 404*.

The idea for writing an original script was far from anything he'd considered until last spring at the cast party for *Damn Yankees*. "Mr. McGreal and I were sitting in the auditorium watching the actors singing and dancing to hip-hop. He turned to me

and said that whatever musical we put on next year needs to have this kind of energy," says Franck, who added that Will then suggested Franck write something. "I'd written parodies and short skits before. When Mr. McGreal brought up the idea, I agreed, thinking I would just be part of the creation process and contribute some songs or ideas -- not that I would be writing the entire story!"

The idea for the story came up during a long car trip last spring. While Will drove, Franck and his friend Alex "Chiti" Tembo '18 were debating the pros and cons of two hip-hop artists with very different styles. Listening to the boys, Will suggested Franck write a story about two competing musicians. Hence, the musical's two main characters took shape: Jay Lavish, a materialistic pop star, and Levi (aka, the Earl of Decatur), an old-school rapper.

Franck began writing over the summer and set the story in Decatur, Georgia, very close to his hometown of Stone Mountain. "Decatur is so diverse and has a coolness that I wanted to use. I thought it would be a great background," Franck explains.

Franck says he was amazed at Will's commitment to help. "Mr. McGreal has so much vision and great ideas," says Franck, who adds that throughout the summer he and Will would talk twice a week to review Franck's latest draft. "He'd give me pointers and help me develop the characters. Then he'd give me another deadline. I wrote the script, but Mr. McGreal fine-tuned it. He was with me the entire time."

"Franck's ear for dialogue needed no coaching," says Will, who adds that Franck needed to develop his sense of story line and an understanding of how people more subtly communicate. "Every time he arrived



“I liked the diversity we had on set. There were kids from all types of cultures that really diversified the entire production thanks in large part to Franck’s urban writing.”

- Juan Mareco (Levi)

at a deeper level of understanding, his ear was able to write dialogue that was pitch-perfect.”

Will says that he used two main themes in coaching Franck’s creative process. “The first is that the real lines of communication occur in the undercurrents of subtext. I would help him understand this by asking him often, ‘What is the character really saying here?’ At first, developing this sensibility took a lot of discussion about behavior, and this would often roll into conversations about the characters in his play.”

Will says that Franck worked very hard over the summer as he put in many hours. “His writing matured. Understanding subtleties and subtext became second nature. By the time he saw me working with actors in scenes he had written, his writing was spot on. I hardly coached him at all on the last version and especially in some last-minute scene additions or rewrites,” says Will.

Will’s second coaching theme was to let the characters determine the plot and not let the plot give the characters words and actions. “This took less time for Franck to learn but represented a huge challenge for him in the beginning,” says Will.

“Franck grew from an inexperienced writer to a rather mature-beyond-his-years-writer in a matter of months. He possesses a true gift, and it was this gift that allowed him to take whatever I had to offer and run miles ahead of me.” Will said he did offer a line here and there and they were, “...quite categorically rejected -- politely, maybe, but on no uncertain terms, ignored.” Franck also had the ear to recognize good lines from others’ improvisations, but he never lost the context of his mature narrative, and only those that fit perfectly were accepted. Franck acknowledges that he learned a lot in terms of writing drama. “You can’t create caricatures. Let the characters paint their own story.”

(Continued on next page.)

## CAST AND CREW:

*Levi - Juan Mareco*  
*Tara - EmmaLee Linaberry*  
*Damian - Cam Carr*  
*Jeremiah - Alex “Chiti” Tembo*  
*Dimitri - David Ayriyants*  
*Brick - Elias Weldegeorgis*  
*Kofi - Katiso Tlelima*  
*Julian - Trammell Thompson*  
*Adrian - Will Lowry*  
*Kane - Zain Bankwalla*  
*Tiny - Zac Wood*  
*Earnest - Henry Robinson*  
*Vince - Souleymane Sylla*  
*Tyreese - Abdullah Al Saud*  
*Kenny - Myles Ham*  
*Keswick - Jack Cline*  
*Braun - Keane Emmans-McGill*  
*Louis - In Yong Song*  
*Rick - Phumisit Veskijkul*  
**Special Appearances:** *Sardaar Calhoun, Myles Jones, Darius McGhee, Derrick Owusu, Henri Sten Vainola, Spencer Cadieux and Peter Sun (cello).*  
**Set Crew:** *Christian Joskowiak, Jack Lutzker, Allen Xiang, Spencer Glenn.*  
**Graffiti Artists:** *Yusef Al Atawi, Tristan Adams, Caleb Werner, Jaab Veskijkul, Colby Boyd, Xol Mike*  
**Light Crew:** *Sanjar Abdychyev, Julien Couraud, Nova Arsenault*  
**Props:** *Charlie Glenn, Khang Nguyen, Cole Kennedy*  
**Business:** *Nawaf Al Saud, Yonas Weldegeorgis*



From left: Alex "Chiti" Tembo '18, Souley Sylla '18, Abdullah Al Saud '19 and Myles Ham '19

"Decatur 404 gave me a chance to showcase my artistic side. I also found that theater helps you break out of your comfort zone, and that's a valuable life skill. Franck is a close friend of mine and I'm especially proud of the work he put in to make this play come to life! It was an overall great experience." - Chiti Tembo '18

Throughout, Will's contribution to the story was focused on coaching and was less content-driven. He acknowledges that his coaching was extensive "...but always in terms of my response to his writing. I was mostly an audience member and an observer of life. Franck began to see himself that way as a writer. He learned to hear the subtext in people's conversations, and he could appreciate the manner in which the audience would be listening to the play."

Franck arrived on campus in the fall of 2017 with the script for *Decatur 404*, and Will was there to help him in every stage of the production – from auditions to directing. "Mr. McGreal respected my vision, and he was by my side the whole time. I never felt like this was work. I not only learned so much about the process but he also taught me to really believe in my vision and to work hard and believe that it would all work out."

"I also learned so much more in these couple of months of being an assistant director than I've ever learned in a classroom. The entire production was run by students, which gave

us real-life experiences - controlling lights, directing, producing. There's no greater way to learn."

Franck also credits technology teacher Mike Burris with helping him compose and create the music. As one of Mike's students last year, Franck learned about producing and creating tracks using the new audio equipment in the Maker Space. "All of what I learned last year really led up to the music for *Decatur 404*."

Over the years, Mike has immersed himself in more electronic-based music. "High-end recording platforms are now easily accessible to the masses," says Mike who adds that one can run professional software on a laptop. In his classroom, he teaches students how to create the music they listen to because "...they can be running with it within minutes."

"Franck proved he's a student who could quickly and effectively apply what I was telling him. He's a great lyrics writer. We collaborated on most of the music and

beats," says Mike. "Mr. Burris worked really hard to help me produce the tracks. If I needed anything, I knew I could count on him to do his magic," says Franck, who adds that Mike is really talented when it comes to creating music.

While Franck and senior Myles Jones wrote the lyrics for the funeral song, Will McGreal wrote the music, including the cello solo. Senior Connor Modd also worked with Franck last year on some of the tracks used in the musical.

"Producing a musical was a big idea, and we had limited time. Thankfully we had a lot of talented people on board! We all felt that we had our reputations on the line, but Mr. McGreal ingrained in me that it really would work and to trust the talented people on the crew and stage," says Franck. Everyone participated and bought in and, in the end, had a great time.

"I wanted the dialogue to be super authentic. Thankfully, we had a really amazing cast of guys who were into doing it. That was one of the best parts!"