

Years of effort brought hero's story to television



Hector Elizondo is Doc, the Army psychiatrist who tries to help D.J., the Vietnam war hero from Detroit played by Damien Leake, in "Medal of Honor Rag."

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

WHEN THE "American Playhouse" production of "Medal of Honor Rag" is aired at 9 p.m. Tuesday and 2 a.m. Wednesday on Channel 56, it will be largely through the efforts of Philip Handleman, a Birmingham resident with a mission.

Handleman has been working toward getting the drama produced on television ever since he saw a University of Detroit production of the Broadway hit by Tom Cole three years ago.

He has vivid memories of meeting Dwight Johnson, black Vietnam War hero and Congressional Medal of Honor awardee whose emotion-charged story is told in "Medal of Honor Rag."

"It goes back over 15 years," Handleman said, recalling the experience that started the chain of events leading to the TV show. "I met Dwight Johnson back in 1971 at a testimonial dinner. He wore a dark green uniform of the Army. He had a chestful of medals and the Medal of Honor around his neck.

"EVEN THOUGH he was touted as a hero he had a very sad look in his eye. It was almost as if I could see the tragic result coming."

Years later, on the night Handleman saw the play, he decided to bring it to television. But he had to go through continuous struggle, from minor problems to major ones, to get "Medal of Honor Rag" to its air date. High in his 13th floor apartment at 555 S. Woodward — where Handleman was the building's first resident — he spoke intently and articulately about the upcoming TV show that is the only "America's Playhouse" drama that is coming out of Michigan.

His hands moved expressively as he was caught up in the story he unfolded. "All of us in Michigan can be proud," he said.

He is executive producer for the TV

adaptation of "Medal of Honor Rag" and has formed Handleman Filmworks for this project. Already he is looking forward to producing other properties and wants only to continue doing quality ones.

HIS TELEVISION work is a sideline for Handleman, who is a stockbroker by profession, with Prescott, Ball & Turben in Troy, a member firm of the New York Stock Exchange.

But his father and his father's brothers started the Handleman Co. in Detroit that has become the world's largest distributor of prerecorded music. Talk around the house during Handleman's childhood (in Detroit, then Shaker Heights, Ohio, and Bloomfield Village) was about the world of entertainment.

Community-oriented because he was taught to "give back what you get," Handleman is active in metropolitan-Detroit civic groups.

On his own, Handleman has helped register black, disfranchised voters in Mississippi and has worked in a factory in Israel, replacing a reservist sent to the front when war broke out in the Middle East. At one time, he was executive assistant to politician Sander Levin.

All his background comes to bear on his decision to bring "Medal of Honor Rag" to television, he said.

HANDLEMAN IS also a pilot and fills his apartment with airplane paintings and ceramics. He collects rare books, including signed first-editions by such authors as Hemingway (his favorite) and Steinbeck and famous names in history.

Most of all, Handleman's reason for seeing the show aired is, "To make a tribute to the man who may have been forgotten by history."

In "Medal of Honor Rag" the real-life Dwight Johnson is fictionalized as D.J., for Dale Jackson, portrayed by Damien Leake. The drama takes place



Birmingham resident Philip Handleman is a Troy stockbroker turned executive producer for "Medal of Honor Rag" on the "American Playhouse" series.

in the Valley Forge Medical Center's visitation room. Action is a dialogue between D.J. and a psychiatrist called Doc, played by Hector Elizondo, who tries to help the soldier come to terms with his wartime experience.

"A range of emotion spills out across the screen," Handleman said. "The play brings out how D.J. was raised in Detroit to be a very fine young man. He was raised to respect his fellow man. At a young age, he was carted off to

another part of the world and taught to kill."

"The play deals with this dichotomy," Handleman said.

JOHNSON RECEIVED the Medal of Honor as a result of an incident in which all his buddies were killed around him and he avenged their death by killing many Viet Cong. The Medal

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