

# goingbarefoot Bio: Mike Wiley

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*“Mike Wiley is a brilliant artist and educator... This is about mending the broken world through the power of story, and making scholarship and art speak to the breach in our common life. I am proud to have Mike as a colleague in those efforts...”* Author Tim Tyson, Blood Done Sign My Name

*“An intensely physical actor and writer who can turn on the charm like nobody’s business. When it comes to working a crowd, Wiley makes Bill Clinton look like a wallflower.”* Independent Weekly

It is a significant and distinctive credit to North Carolina actor & playwright Mike Wiley that audiences rarely leave a venue after his curtain call.

The theatrical experience just shared begs one’s further engagement, raises questions to be shared, breeds emotion wanting space to be expressed. The talented dramatist’s performances on stages across the nation continue to shape a new kind of inspired blending of art and education.

Formerly of Theatre IV and Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, Wiley has more than twelve years’ credits in theatre for young audiences, plus film, television and regional theatre. An Upward Bound alum and Trio Achiever Award recipient, he is an M.F.A. graduate of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. A gifted playwright and actor, Wiley’s overriding goal is expanding cultural awareness for audiences of all ages through dynamic portrayals based on pivotal moments in African-American history and, in doing so, helping to unveil a richer picture of the total American experience.

Recently named the Lehman Brady Visiting Professor at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, Wiley now performs from coast to coast -- Oregon to Florida, Mississippi to Idaho. Sought by performing arts centers large and small and by educators from middle schools to universities, Wiley’s work was featured for the first time with multiple performances in the 2009 National Black Theatre Festival. He has been jury-selected for professional industry showcases by both the Midwest Arts Federation and Southern Arts Federation.

His expanding rich repertoire of original productions each display his acclaimed ability for bringing to life multiple intertwined characters, with Wiley often

portraying more than two dozen persons in a single “one-man” drama. Morphing from a young boy to a grieving grandmother, a white slave owner to an African American sports hero are tools of his well-honed trade. His performances actively engage audiences, repeatedly bringing surprising, unexpected elements of personal participation and discovery to the theatrical experience.

Mike Wiley holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has appeared on the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel and the National Geographic Channel. Profiled in *Our State* magazine, Wiley is currently gaining additional acclaim and multiple “Best Actor” awards at film festivals in the US and Europe for the impressive Rob Underhill film **EMPTY SPACE**.

Late 2009 saw the debut of Wiley’s newest original work, with another original work set to debut in early 2011. ***Blood Done Sign My Name*** is the theatrical adaptation of the best-selling memoir by Tim Tyson, recounting the Oxford, NC murder of a young black Vietnam veteran in 1970. With a sellout opening run produced at Duke University in Durham, NC, this remarkable tour de force directed by Serena Ebhardt has proven a powerful and riveting dramatic re-telling that has drawn capacity audiences at every subsequent scheduled performance. Wiley has now performed the play for two consecutive years in Oxford at the invitation of the town where the infamous hate crime occurred.

In 2011, Wiley will premiere a new theatre ensemble in ***The Parchman Hour***, a radio theatre drama commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Freedom Riders – broadcast from the Mississippi State Penitentiary’s Parchman Farm.

As with all Mike Wiley Productions, abbreviated student versions of each play are offered, with custom study guides designed for each recommended age group.

### **Contextually Rich Repertoire, Far from a One-Man Show**

Wiley says he founded his production company specifically to shine light on untold stories from the African American past.

“In ***One Noble Journey***, I become Henry “Box” Brown, Ellen Craft, William Craft, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and countless others. ***Brown vs. Board*** is spattered with historical figures such as the main character Oliver Brown, and Thurgood Marshall, Earl Warren, and of course Linda Brown herself. ***A Game Apart*** puts me in the cleats of Jackie Robinson, Jessie Owens, Althea Gibson and the president of the 1947 Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey. Within the first ten minutes of ***Dar He***, I play seven different men and women...

“Each play requires willing audience participation, and it’s always there,” he

comments. “Teachers and students alike become slaves, Olympic athletes, Supreme Court justices. I want to bring people out of their seats and have them feel what a slave, a civil rights worker or a juror might feel. They rarely speak lines, but they become every bit a part of the performance.

“There’s a scene in *One Noble Journey* where Henry ‘Box’ Brown and his brother are informed that they are going to be separated -- and the way Brown accounts for it, they think, ‘Is this is the hour of our emancipation?’ So I pull someone from the audience to be the brother, never taking race into account. I just want someone else to stand in those shoes. And if it touches just one person, that’s the goal I’ve achieved.

### **Age-less Impact**

An industry colleague summed up Wiley’s work in this way: “His creative vision & abilities are so broad and magnetic that he truly changes your space with his presence. He’s one of those persons for whom you search to find ways to thank. ‘Mike Wiley’ doesn’t leave when the curtain comes down. What he brings to you doesn’t come with an expiration date.”

Accolades from adult audiences and presenting professionals are as profound as comments from the middle-through-high school students for whom Wiley frequently performs .

“I was blessed and overwhelmed. I will truthfully say that I have never seen anything like what you had to share...definitely remarkable.”

“Thank you for this courageous production of a complex and troubling piece of history that most don't know anything about, nor care to know. As a friend of ours said to us as we met walking away from theatre after the show, "What were the other 79,000 people in this town doing tonight? They should have been here. Thanks for coming to town and sharing with us your vision, truth, and wisdom."

“I just want to encourage you to keep doing what you are doing. You are a genuine African-American educator, and we need more males like you for our youth to see and emulate.”

“Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till” is a production that deserves to be on every stage in North Carolina... Yes, it's a tough subject - but that should not deter anyone from presenting this piece. Exploring an event many of us think we know - but probably don't - the evening takes the audience on a journey through laughter, tears and quiet reflection. As the audience left the theatre on Thursday night, many simply looked my way and nodded - not wanting to speak, or unable to.”

## **MIKE WILEY PRODUCTIONS: Touring Repertoire**

All productions include post-show discussion Q&A; study guides available.

See additional resources in Presenter Toolkit links at [www.goingbarefoot.com](http://www.goingbarefoot.com)

- ***One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom***

A true story of three slaves who overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to gain a life of freedom. Wiley becomes Henry "Box" Brown a black slave who sees no alternative but to mail himself to freedom in a small crate. Brown's life unfolds like a Mark Twain adventure, perilous and somber at times while humorous and heroic throughout. Audience members join Wiley on stage, quickly and quietly becoming characters helping propel the historic action.

- *Full-length, 90 min., for mixed audience; 50-min. student version for grades 3-up.*

- ***Brown Vs Board of Education: Over Fifty Years Later***

In 1952, the Supreme Court heard a number of school-segregation cases, including *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. It ruled unanimously in 1954 that segregation was unconstitutional, overthrowing *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that had set the "separate but equal" precedent. A tour de force that encapsulates the high impact ruling for desegregating schools.

- *50 min; grades 6-up, plus general audience.*

- ***Jackie Robinson: A Game Apart***

A play that can intrigue, educate and set one's thirst for success on fire; a powerful lesson of courage through dedication and leadership, of African-American athletes who pushed the color barrier to its break point. Meet role models from the outfield, the backcourt, the track, the ring, the blacktop, the mud rising from the blood, sweat and tears of a bygone era of separate unequal locker rooms, whites-only hotels and restaurants with only a back door through which *colored athletes* could enter.

- *50 min.; grades 3-up, general audience.*

- ***Tired Souls: The Montgomery Bus Boycott***

Fifty years ago, a petite black woman, tired from a day's work, rested her weary bones on a segregated Alabama city bus. Rosa Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat to a white man sparked a movement among Montgomery's black citizens that would carry their cries for equality around the world and subsequently resound in the halls of the Supreme Court. This play documents the tales of Martin Luther King Jr. and nearly a dozen others of the hundreds of men and women who stood up to Jim Crow's segregation, held tight to their bus money and walked for freedom for 381 days.

- *50 min.; grades 3-up, plus general audience.*

- ***Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till***

In 1955, a 14-year-old black Chicago youth traveled to the Mississippi Delta with country kinfolk and southern cooking on his mind. He walked off the train

and into a world he could never understand -- a world of thick color lines, of hard-held class systems and unspeakable taboos. Young Emmett crossed that line and stepped into his gruesome fate by whistling at a white woman. This riveting play chronicles the murder, trial and unbelievable confession of the men accused of Till's lynching.

• *Full-length, 90 min., for mixed audience; 50-min. student version, grades 8-up.*

• ***Blood Done Sign My Name***

"Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger." Those incendiary words, spoken by ten-year-old Gerald Teel in the spring of 1970 were merely a harbinger of the turmoil smoldering on Oxford, North Carolina's dark horizon. Henry "Dickie" Marrow, a 23-year-old U.S. Army veteran whose wife was pregnant with their third daughter, had been beaten and shot to death by Robert Teel, his son Larry, and Roger Oakley, Teel's stepson, for allegedly making a remark to Larry Teel's wife. The men were acquitted of the crime by an all-white jury, despite testimony by two black eyewitnesses. Roger Oakley, Teel's stepson, actually confessed to shooting the gun but was never indicted. But it was the Teels' acquittal for their hot-headed hate crime that launched Oxford into a season of violent reprisals. Based on Tim Tyson's award winning memoir, *Blood Done Sign My Name* is meant to acknowledge America's painful racial history, "that our freedom and dignity, if we still have any, has been paid for in blood, that we have a contract with our ancestors not to let their sacrifices be in vain." Features special guest, gospel recording artist Mary D. Williams.

• *Full-length, 90 min., for mixed audience, 50-min. student version, grades 8-up.*

• ***The Parchman Hour (touring from January 2011)***

Mike Wiley Productions' newest work commemorates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Freedom Riders. In 1961, the original 13 riders had boarded a bus in Washington, DC bound for New Orleans via Mississippi and Alabama. They barely made it out of Alabama alive. Over the course of the next three months, approximately 300 other riders took up the mantle and followed the path of those first brave few. Mobs brutally assaulted many. Others were arrested and, instead of posting bail, chose to serve sentences in one of the most brutal prisons in the South, Parchman Farm, proving the Freedom Riders and the movement to desegregate interstate travel would not be deterred. Utilizing the race rhetoric and the soulful sounds of the 1960's, an 8-member ensemble breathes new life into what was perhaps the most tense three months of the American Civil Rights Movement. Originally produced by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and The Lab at UNC Chapel Hill, this moving production brings to the stage powerful oral histories and conversations from the Freedom Struggle's most iconic protagonists and antagonists alike. *The Parchman Hour* is a celebration of bravery and a call to action through remembrance, leaving the audience asking 'Who stood up for me?' Moreover, for whom can I stand up for today?"

• *Full-length, 90 min., for mixed audience, 50-min. student version for grades 6-up.*