

Tar Heel of the Week:

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Actor-playwright turns on the light for honest discussion

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Mike Wiley knows how easy it is for the mind to distort things.

Sit in a dark room at night, and a coat rack can look like a menacing stranger, a blanket like a monster. Turn on a light, and these imaginary threats melt away.

Wiley aims to be that light switch, transforming the distorting forces of fear, ignorance and prejudice into understanding or at least open debate.

A playwright and actor, Wiley tours the nation performing one-man shows primarily about African-American history. He has portrayed baseball player Jackie Robinson and a slave who mailed himself north in a box. He has re-enacted the Brown v. Board of Education integration case and the Montgomery bus boycott. He has told the tale of the Tuskegee Airmen and of Emmett Till, the Chicago teen murdered while visiting the Mississippi Delta in 1955.

This week he will portray people involved in the execution of death row inmates in Huntsville, Texas, and elsewhere in "Witness to an Execution," the final installment in UNC-Chapel Hill's yearlong Creative Campus project, "Criminal/Justice: The Death Penalty Examined."

"My job is to turn on the light and show people different cultures, different individuals, different stories, so that you can have an honest discussion about race, you can have an honest discussion about execution," says Wiley, 35, who lives in Apex. "If you don't know the different angles of that culture or that particular individual, then you are in the dark."

Since he launched his touring company in 1999, Wiley's lively shows have attracted a devoted fan base locally and nationwide. And he is continually creating new shows.

Premiering soon

In September, he hopes to premiere his solo adaptation of local writer Timothy B. Tyson's historical memoir "Blood Done Sign My Name," about a 1970 race-motivated murder in Oxford.

In October at the Holly Springs Cultural Center, he'll premiere a two-person adaptation of Richard Glaubman and George Dawson's "Life is So Good," Dawson's account of being a black man in the segregated South and learning to read at age 98.

Wiley performs in community centers, in churches, in traditional theaters such as Chapel Hill's Deep Dish and Durham's Manbites Dog, and in middle and high schools across the nation.



Mike Wiley is preparing to perform 'Witness to an Execution' at UNC-Chapel Hill. His plays focus on African-American history. Staff Photo by Leslie Barbour

Most of his performances are followed by post-show discussions, the highlight for Wiley, who has grown adept at dispelling the tension his shows can create and encouraging people to speak.

"He can open up a door and bring the audience in with him," says "Execution" director Kathryn Hunter Williams. "And in that way, they're comfortable enough to go with him to places that may not be comfortable for them to be."

Hunter Williams anticipates that the March slaying of UNC-CH student Eve Carson will make Wiley's new show particularly emotional for local theatergoers and the post-show conversation potentially cathartic.

"We're human," she says of audiences. "We really want to be heard."

Early stage work

Wiley began acting in elementary school, when he was asked to play Abraham Lincoln -- an irony not lost on him even then. By middle school, he was performing Martin Luther King Jr. speeches and other monologues at churches and community centers in Roanoke, Va., where he grew up.

He says he was driven by how proud his performances made his mother, a divorcee who worked for a night-vision goggle manufacturer. Lately, Linda Wiley has taken to creating educational puppet shows, an avocation she credits to her son. He insists it was in her all along and she was the source of his own creative instincts.

In high school, Wiley went to what was then the Soviet Union with an international group called Peace Child, performing a play that U.S. and Soviet teens had written about nuclear weapons, social issues and the environment.

He wrote his first one-man play -- "One Noble Journey," about Henry "Box" Brown, the Virginia slave who mailed himself north to freedom -- in 1999, after noting a lack of touring artists focusing on African-American history.

He didn't anticipate the escalating success of his solo shows, but those who hired Wiley are not surprised.

Cissy O'Neal, who heads the social studies department at Chapel Hill-Carrboro's McDougle Middle School, says she never has to remind students to sit still when Wiley's on stage.

"By the end of the performance, Mike Wiley has commanded their highest respect and regard," says O'Neal, whose school has hosted several of his shows.

Wiley moved to the Triangle after premiering "One Noble Journey" at Durham's Manbites Dog in 2000. He later earned a master's degree from UNC-CH, where "Witness to an Execution" was born.

The 75-minute play, commissioned by UNC's PlayMakers Repertory Company, grew from an acting class assignment. Wiley had heard a radio documentary of the same name produced by Sound Portraits for National Public Radio. He was riveted.

"You listen to it, and no matter what side you come down on in this whole debate, you have to realize that execution is inhumane to the executioner," Wiley says. "In writing this piece, I sought to make that apparent."

While at UNC-CH, Wiley wrote his Jackie Robinson show and also performed in "Brown v. Board of Education," which Apex playwright Serena Ebhardt wrote with Wiley in mind.

Colleagues impressed

Ebhardt has directed several Wiley shows, and she also produces and performs intimate historical shows for her own EbzB Productions. She is impressed with Wiley's ability to portray multiple characters and admires the complexity of his writing.

"While many of his works examine civil rights, Mike doesn't frame his stories as black vs. white, good vs. bad," Ebhardt wrote by e-mail. "Instead, he examines events from all points of view -- in context and with relativity. His ultimate moral is clear, but he's explained his parable to those that have ears and still produced an evening of amazement for those who cannot yet hear."

Tyson praises those same qualities, which he says made Wiley an ideal adapter for "Blood Done Sign My Name."

He saw Wiley for the first time at Deep Dish Theater in the 2006 premiere of "Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till" -- a topic Tyson has also researched at length. Awestruck, he promptly bought 11 tickets to the next night's performance so he could bring his children, their friends and others.

Tyson says he considers Wiley a colleague, a sophisticated and diligent historian.

"Even though he's a playwright, and there's a sense in which this is a work of the imagination," Tyson says, "it's really all historical research from documentary sources, which he explores and interprets and then makes come to life."

Ebhardt calls Wiley's work a ministry, a term Wiley says he resisted at first because it seemed too heavy and demanding of reverence. But now he says he embraces it.

"It is a ministry, because it makes people think, and that's what ministers do: They make you think; they move you to action or at least dialogue," he says. "I'm hoping that by what we're creating, we will move people to action."

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