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One-man show spotlights Emmett Till

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Actor Mike Wiley wanted to set the record straight about Emmett Till. Credit: Contact us for information/News & Record

Want to go?

What: The National Black Theatre Festival presents dual performances of 'Nora Cole's Voice of the Spirits in My Soul' and 'Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till'

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Wake Forest University, Scale Fine Arts Center, Ring Theatre, 1834 Wake Forest Drive, Winston-Salem

Tickets: \$37

Information: 723-7907 or www.nbtf.org

Etc.: www.mikewileyproductions.com

(updated 3:00 am)

By [Joe Scott](#)

North Carolina actor Mike Wiley loves rapper Kanye West.

But when West rapped about the events surrounding his disfiguring car accident in the 2003 song "Through the Wire" and implied his face looked like Emmett Till's, Wiley felt those lyrics needed clarification.

"I felt that young people as well as older individuals hearing that needed to truly be educated as to what Emmett's face looked like and how Emmett was killed," says Wiley, who lives in Apex.

So the actor began to research and write what would ultimately become "Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till," a one-man show about 14-year-old Till, who was murdered for whistling at a white woman in 1955 Mississippi. The plays delves into the details surrounding Till's murder and the brave individuals who sought justice in the trial.

The actor plays an entire cast of characters based on the real-life people involved with the tragedy many feel helped spark the Civil Rights Movement.

Wiley will perform the play 8 p.m. Tuesday as part of the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem.

This 90-minute show uses actual testimonies and first-hand accounts surrounding August 28, 1955, when Emmett Louis "Bobo" Till was taken from his uncle's house in Money, Miss.

He was beaten and mutilated before he was shot in the head. Afterwards, his body was anchored to a 70-pound cotton gin fan via barbed wire and tossed into the Tallahatchie River where it stayed until discovered three days later.

When Till's body was found, his face had been mangled and warped beyond human recognition.

But his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, decided to give her son a public funeral with an open casket, a move many now view as a salvo for the Civil Rights Movement.

Wiley, who received a master's degree in fine arts for acting from UNC-Chapel Hill is no stranger to demanding theater. He was a former member of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, a company that pushes its actors to learn the lines of several characters from a handful of the Bard's plays at once, so they can perform them at any given time on the road.

To memorize all the lines, voices and mannerisms of the characters from his own play, Wiley uses several rituals. He recites the entire play while doing cardiovascular exercises to re-create the breathing demands of the actual show, and he'll even separate each individual character from the script and say all their lines at once.

"There are also times where I will in essence put myself to sleep at night by saying the play from the end to the beginning," Wiley says. "That is basically saying the play backwards."

Because Wiley is the only actor onstage for the duration of the play, the actor feels his dedication is necessary in the event that an audience member's cell phone might go off and derail his performance.

"It just depends on the audience, so my concentration has to be even greater so that I'm not locking out the audience and how the performance works," Wiley says.

As for the title of the play, Wiley got it from the real life testimony of Till's uncle, the Rev. Moses Wright, who boldly identified one of his son's killers to the all-white jury by proclaiming, "Dar he&ellipses; dar he is right dar."

Wiley says, "It was such a rare occasion that a black man was testifying against two white men in a Mississippi court room and taking his life in his hands and putting himself figuratively against a bullet."

After he made his testimony, Wright immediately left the courtroom and his home in Mississippi for good. He left behind family, friends and his farm because it was certain he would be dead within a week.

"Mamie sacrificed her son, and in so many ways her own life given the fact that she then spent the rest of her life seeking justice for her son," Wiley says. "And in any manner of ways, Moses Wright gave up the life that he had, too, so that he could see justice."

Contact Joe Scott at movieshowjoe@gmail.com.

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- **Current Condition:** PARTLY CLOUDY
- **Current Temperature:** 86°
- **Forecast High/Low:** 86°/72°

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