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'One Noble Journey,' Thursday at Ware Center, tells story of Henry 'Box' Brown's journey to Freedom



JANE HOLAHAN | Entertainment Reporter Apr 12, 2017



CHRIS CHARLES

Mike Wiley in "One Noble Journey"

The literal journey in "One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom," the one-man show being performed at the Ware Center Thursday, was anything but noble, but the spirit of it certainly was.

In 1849, Henry Brown, an enslaved man from Louisa County, Virginia, had himself shipped as cargo from Richmond to Philadelphia, where slavery was illegal, and to freedom.

The box, labeled Dry Goods, was three feet long, two feet eight inches deep and two feet wide.

"He was in the box for 27 hours, and he was upside down for 18 of those hours," says Mike Wiley, who wrote and will be portraying all the characters in "One Noble Journey."

"He took some hardtack — this flavorless lard, biscuit mixture and a leather bladder of water," Wiley explains. "It was not so much to drink, but because it was incredibly hot in the box."

Brown had the help of several people in his journey, including a freed black man named James C.A. Smith, and a white shoemaker named Samuel Smith, who actually mailed the wooden box from a post office in Richmond.

Once free, Brown toured the country — now known as Henry “Box” Brown — talking about his ordeal. In 1850, after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, Brown worried he might be captured and returned to his master, so he moved to England. Years later, after slavery was abolished, he returned.

Wiley found out about Brown when he was living in Richmond.

box

“Before the 2000s, he was relatively unknown,” Wiley says. “But since then a couple of books have been written about him.”

Wiley has written seven one- man shows about African-American lives, which he tours throughout the country.

He brought “Dar He: Story of Emmett Till” to the Ware Center last year. Other subjects he’s written shows about include Jackie Robinson, the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Fighters, Abrahan Galloway, a slave and spy for the Union army, and Brown vs. the Board of Education.

“I don’t consider these plays strictly educational,” Wiley says. “I went into this, beginning with ‘One Noble Journey,’ in wanting to be entertaining first and foremost. The fact that people learn is icing on the cake.”

He’s been touring these productions for 16 years and goes all across the United States and Canada.

Wiley got bitten by the theater bug when he was in sixth grade.

“I played Abe Lincoln in a school play and that fit me into a life of wanting to be in the theater.”

He earned a Master of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He teaches there and at Duke University.

Wiley started writing his shows in 1999.

“I didn’t want to wait for someone to give me the opportunity to pursue my crafts,” he says,

He wants his stories to educate the audience, but also move them and entertain them.

“The biggest challenge is not wanting it to be the same story of enslavement that we had before,” Wiley says. “I wanted to infuse my own brand of humor, as well as dramatic interpretation.”¶

IF YOU GO

What: “One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom.”

Where: Ware Center, 42 N. Prince St.

When: Thursday, 7:30 p.m. (audience talk at 6:45 p.m.)

Cost: \$15.

Contact: 717-871-7600 or artsmu.com.

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