

'The Parchman Hour'

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By Gregory Childress

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CHAPEL HILL -- Doug Bynum was thrilled a few years back when he got the chance to meet U.S. Rep. John Lewis, the Georgia congressman and civil rights icon who in 1965 famously suffered a fractured skull at the hands of racist police officers while leading a march in Selma, Ala.

Bynum, 28, an actor from Orange County, said the occasion was to accept a citation for the money his church's youth organization raised and donated to help build the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Little did Bynum know at the time that he would one day portray Lewis in a play -- "The Parchman Hour" -- about a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, the Freedom Rides, which Lewis helped to lead as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

"It's almost like it has come back full circle," Bynum said last week. "I feel like it's almost like things were meant to turn out this way."

Road to Freedom

The Freedom Rides were conducted in the spring of 1961 to challenge racial segregation on interstate buses.

Armed with a new U.S. Supreme Court ruling outlawing racial segregation in the restaurants and waiting rooms in terminals serving buses that crossed state lines, the Freedom Riders, groups of mostly young, black and white college students, boarded Greyhound and Trailways buses and headed South during the spring of 1961.

They met bitter resistance from angry, white Southerners who refused to accept the changing racial landscape. Some were beaten and hospitalized for their efforts to bring about social change.

Bynum and his colleagues won't receive that kind of reception this week when they perform "The Parchman Hour" in Mississippi to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders.

The actors and musicians boarded a bus Friday just before midnight heading South to Jackson, Miss., where they are scheduled to perform this week at the Jackson Convention Complex, Mississippi State University, Durant High School, Delta State University and St. Luke's United Methodist Church.

The commemoration is being hosted by the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church in conjunction with a national gathering to pay homage to the men and women who endured all manner of indignities and abuse during the fight against racism and inequality.

Some of them found themselves incarcerated at Parchman Farm, an infamously brutal penitentiary in Mississippi, and the setting of the play written by Mike Wiley, 38, a visiting professor at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Debt of gratitude

"It's a way to give thanks," said Wiley, explaining why he decided to write a play about the Freedom Rides. "This was certainly before my time, but I realize I wouldn't be able to do what I do were it not for the freedom riders."

Wiley's play is powerful and features stinging debates between Bynum's Lewis character and the actor portraying Stokely Carmichael that highlight the men's opposing views over the nonviolent approach to achieving civil rights goals.

"What we have put together will remind quite a few Mississippians of a time that was dark in many respects, but was filled with so many possibilities and so much hope," Wiley said.

David Serxner, the play's costume designer, said the story of the Freedom Riders is an important one, and also a reminder for progressive-minded citizens to not become complacent.

Serxner noted a Southern heritage group's current proposal for a state-issued license plate to honor Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

"It's like two steps forward and three steps back," Serxner said. "We can't afford to become complacent."

High school history hole

Bynum, who attended Orange High School and N.C. School of Science and Mathematics, said he'd never learned about the Freedom Rides while in high school.

But a quartet of senior musicians from East Chapel Hill High School playing a soulful and bluesy sound track for the play will be well-versed in the subject matter by the time they graduate.

"I've really been educated about the Freedom Rides," said Michael Grathwohl, a member of the band that calls itself Rev. B and the WannaB's. "It's really been an eye-opening experience."

The band includes Henry Gargan, Tommy Moore and Sam Tyson, son of historian and author Timothy B. Tyson, who is traveling with the actors and band to Mississippi.

Sharing the rich history of heroes from this important era in the nation's history was uppermost in Wiley's mind when he put pen to paper to create "The Parchman Hour."

Enough is enough

"That's why I write," Wiley said. "My aim is to inspire young people to not only research individuals they see being portrayed on stage, but to take that opportunity to seek out who in their community and their families stood up and said, 'Enough is enough.'"

He explained that the stories about Martin Luther King and other high-profile civil right leaders are well known, but the stories of ordinary people who mustered extraordinary bravery in the face of grave threats are in danger of being lost.

"We've got to inspire young people to seek out those paths and trails in their own communities that have gone cold," Wiley said. "Martin Luther King didn't go into every community in the South. Someone else had to stand up and say enough. We've got to find these stories."