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Harrowing History
North Carolina actor shines light on dark chapters of black history

Actor and playwright Mike Wiley portrays heroes, sports legends, fugitive slaves, murderers and murder victims – black, white, male and female. Stereotypes, racism and fears of the unknown are banished by the stark light Wiley focuses on those dark corners and abysses.

In Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till, Wiley has written a script in which he embodies 36 characters to re-enact the story of a 14-year-old black Chicago youth, who in 1955 stepped off a train in Mississippi and crossed a line that led to his mutilation and death and a nationally publicized trial of the men accused of his brutal murder. Newsman Ed Bradley called Till’s death “a spark that ignited the civil rights movement in America.”

Seventy years later, that fateful train stops one more time on Thursday, April 2, at 7:30 p.m. ETSU’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium, sponsored by Mary B. Martin School of the Arts as part of ETSU’s “Think. Live. Respect.” series.

“I think the timing for us to present this is significant,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of the School of the Arts. “The university developed a series of events for the spring semester to evoke conversations about race relations with our student population and community. So we are excited to bring Mike here for this performance and conversation. Following the performance, Mike will come out of character and participate in a Q&A with the audience.”

After the “tornado” of a performance, Wiley says the talkback following is a critical element of the experience. “The Q&A is always my favorite part, because I get to leave the play behind and have a really good discussion with the audience,” he says. “It’s extremely important.”

The discussion not only allows the actor to step out of the shadow of this dark history, but it helps audience members do the same. “They get to shake off the play as we talk …” he says. “Audiences see I’m certainly an actor doing this, but over the course of the play, they develop this hatred for the men that killed Emmett, and so, once I step away from that, it allows them to step away from the hatred as well.”

Wiley enacts the riveting saga of Emmett Till through “conversations” with a Look magazine journalist, Emmett’s mother, Mamie, and others caught up in the events surrounding the pivotal moment in America’s history, when the Chicago teen “walked into a world he could never
understand,” Wiley says, “a world of thick color lines, of hard-held class systems and unspeakable taboos.”

Young Till, who was on his first visit to Mississippi, walked into Bryant’s Grocery in Money, Miss., with several other teens to buy bubble gum. While there, he apparently whistled at a white woman, the owner’s wife. Till was subsequently abducted and found a few days after the incident, floating in the Tallahatchie River, his body beaten beyond recognition, shot in the head and tied with barbed wire by the neck to a 75-pound weight.

"I do these plays,” Wiley says, “because I believe stereotypes and racism and things of that nature arise from fear — because we are scared of the unknown. When we were children … we thought that box in the corner was a monster because we didn’t have the lights on to tell us that it was just a box. But when the lights came on and we saw it was just a box, the fear disappeared.

“The same logic can be applied to our perceptions of other cultures or religions or races. We turn the light on. We figure out who they are. We learn about them. Then we’re not afraid of them anymore.”

Because of the confluence of race-related events recently, Wiley says, “We have an opportunity to educate and really change the minds when it comes to society and race and inclusion. I think people are interested in hearing about the root of some of these tragic events. I’m a big believer in that if you don’t know your history, then you’re doomed, as people say, to repeat it.”

Former Atlanta mayor and ambassador to the U.N. Andrew Young Jr. has endorsed the play to encourage ongoing exchange. “This is a very important time for us to think really deeply and together about the problems that affect our society,” Young says in a video, “and Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till is one of the basic points that open that dialogue for our time … realizing that here in 2015 we’re still struggling with many of the same questions. But the answers are not the same.”

As well as the topic, the range of characters, historical information and locales make Dar He’s impression indelible. “Wiley is a marvel to watch as the characters he portrays appear and disappear before us,” says Robert McDowell in Triangle Theatre Reviews. “Wiley recreates Till, Huey, and all of the other characters with a depth and clarity that make each one readily identifiable, and as distinct as an entire cast of players could make them.”

The play has been made into a film, Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till (2012), starring Wiley again playing all the parts. His other plays include The Parchman Hour about the Freedom Riders; A Game Apart, a look into the life of Jackie Robinson; One Noble Journey, the story of a man who shipped himself to freedom in a box; Tired Souls: King and the Montgomery Bus Boycott; and Blood Done Sign My Name, about the recollections of author Tim Tyson on the 1970 murder of Henry Marrow.

“To me, it’s very important that I tell these stories because who knows where, or if, these stories will be told,” says Wiley, who holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is the 2010 Lehman Brady Visiting Joint Chair Professor in Documentary
Studies and American Studies at Duke University and UNC-Chapel Hill. “The stories are important to me, because they are my history. It’s all of our history …

“I especially want to share stories with young people who perhaps aren’t being given the opportunity to hear the stories in their schools or in their communities.”

In addition to school and community performances, the writer and actor has appeared on Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel and National Geographic Channel, as well as on PBS.

“Wiley reminds us that we are all actors and observers, oppressors and the oppressed,” says Scott Walters in American Theater, “participants in a larger world and reflective thinkers.”

For more information on Wiley’s work, visit http://www.mikewileyproductions.com.

Tickets for Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till are $5 for students of all ages, $10 seniors 60+ and $15 general admission.

For information about the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin. Please “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.