

Blood Done Sign My Name: Afraid of the dark in the South

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Blood Done Sign My Name
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Professor of Christianity and southern culture at Duke University, author, and historian [Timothy B. Tyson](#) is never far from a life-changing moment he experienced as a child growing up in Granville County, North Carolina. Tyson was witness to a turning point in the racially charged southern small town of Oxford. Like many such southern communities in the period immediately following the civil rights movement of the mid-to-late 1960s, Oxford residents were grappling with what the future of race would look like in their hometown and beyond.

Vietnam Vet Henry Marrow's racially motivated murder and the subsequent acquittal of the white businessman and his sons accused of the crime in 1972 became the backdrop for Tyson's history paper in 1982 as a freshman in college. Some years later, this paper became the basis for scholarly research and his Master's thesis while in graduate school at Duke University.

The manuscript went on to become a National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist and best seller, [Blood Done Sign My Name](#) (Three Rivers Press). Independent filmmaker and Gastonia native Jeb Stuart made Tyson's book into a thoughtful, revealing film portrayal last year that was met with some critical praise, though it never made significant box office success, possibly due to the lack of "big name" Hollywood stars in the film.

Tyson noted at the time of the film's release, "The agents for several huge, bankable Hollywood leading men, all of them white actors, offered their clients for the role of Vernon Tyson – if Jeb Stuart would just rewrite the part of Vernon Tyson a little and make him the Great White Hero who saves the day. This is the Hollywood tradition, of course. ("Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passin.'") Jeb Stuart is a great screenwriter and director with a lot of integrity, and I appreciate that. That's a big part of what made this movie matter."

In an adaptation by stage actor and writer [Mike Wiley](#), followers of the story can see yet another, more intimate portrayal of the events depicted in Tyson's award-winning 2005 book. The one man show opened in Durham in 2008 and has toured throughout various North Carolina communities with a 90-minute performance punctuated by multi-media images and the moving gospel/blues/freedom singing of Mary D. Williams. A proponent of educational theater, Wiley also created an abridged 50-minute version of the play he has taken to middle and high schools across the state.

Wiley says he does plays like *Blood Done Sign My Name* in order to shine a light on stereotypes and racism born of ignorance and fear. "When we were children," says Wiley, "we were scared of the dark... because we didn't know what was in the dark. 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."

At the Booth on Thursday theatergoers experienced plenty of shining light. They saw the kind of brightness that accompanies the heat of a fiery performance. It was on full display with Wiley at the helm of no less than twenty separate character portrayals. From young ten-year-old Tim Tyson, to his father and main protagonist, Reverend Vernon Tyson, to Tyson's mother and various Oxford residents, to the story's antagonists Robert and Larry Teel, Wiley shifts into character with the ease and aplomb.

One-man shows are somewhat of a rarity in theater today as television- and action drama-nursed audiences seem to demand nonstop motion and special effects over smart dialogue and nuanced acting. Of those that make it to the stage, Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain*, for example, most allow actors the luxury of remaining within character for an entire performance. With *BDSMN*, Wiley has no such succor.

In order to advance the story and portray the attitudes, tension, and emotion surrounding the events that occurred in the spring of 1970, he must show us the faces and souls of all those who lived through this unlikely flashpoint in American civil rights history. Wiley has no foil other than his own chameleon-like portrayals to play off of, yet he shows the depth and breadth of his craft in making the audience believe he can be in one moment the elder Teel, a racist Klansman, and civil rights activist Golden Frinks the next.

Wiley wears each successive character like a familiar flannel shirt, comfortable in the skin; he assumes the posture, facial expressions, and uncanny vocal impersonations that carry the drama to its saddened, yet unsurprising conclusion. Ms. Williams's gripping rendition of the title song sung both at the opening and the close with no accompaniment are pitch perfect and stirring audio commentary that go far in setting the tone and overall authentic feel to both the period and the place. She punctuates Wiley's performance with just the right combination of soft and melodic undertones and roiling spirituals, which sets the mood appropriately for the play's dialogue.

Wiley and Williams sat with the sparse crowd after the performance to entertain questions and engage in conversation around the events that were portrayed onstage. No one left, and the ensuing exchange demonstrated just how much these two performers work to connect with their audience. Theater at its most powerful occurs when deep connections between material, performers, and audiences occur. This is one such experience that delivers on all counts.