



IDEAS

Playing both sides

Mike Wiley's one-man shows unlock stories of slavery and racism in the Deep South.

By Glenn McDonald

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In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black kid from Chicago, traveled to the Mississippi Delta to visit family. After being accused of whistling at a white woman, he was abducted, tortured, and killed by a gang of white men. His killers were acquitted by an all-white jury.

In *Dar-He: The Story of Emmett Till*, actor and playwright Mike Wiley plays all of those roles himself.

Wiley has made a two-decade career writing, performing, and touring a series of one-man shows mining the history of racism and slavery in America. He portrays dozens of characters within each story: the old men and the young women, the revolutionaries and the racists, the cops and the killers. His experimental plays — about a famously difficult subject — have become a Southeastern theater sensation, with performances booked up and down the coast, before audiences of all backgrounds.

For Wiley, the immediacy of live theater is the key to unlocking these stories, and so is the particular intimacy of a one-man show. Whether he's portraying a hero or a villain, there's nowhere else for the audience to look. That lack of distance, he says, forces the audience to view the characters as equally human, flawed, and also familiar — and forces him, as an actor, to do the same.

“I want the audience to think, ‘That person reminds me of my racist uncle. Or that person reminds me of my dad.’”



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“An actor can play the role of a Southern white supremacist as what we call a Franken-Southerner — a giant monster that no one can identify with,” he says. “I want the audience to look at that person and either identify with that character or go so far as to think, ‘That person reminds me of my racist uncle. Or that person reminds me of my dad.’”

Wiley terms his productions “documentary theater” because they draw from both contemporary theater and documentary filmmaking techniques, using public records, archival materials, and old storytelling traditions as source material. His repertoire includes well-known tales, like the sagas of baseball player Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But he also roots out more obscure stories.

He discovered the subject of his first one-man show in the summer of 1999, when he was a few years out of college and cobbling together a living performing in local movies, children’s theater, and small theater companies.

Speaking backstage with local performers in Richmond, Virginia, Wiley heard the tale of Henry “Box” Brown, a slave in Virginia who mailed himself to freedom by sealing himself in a wooden crate that was shipped to Philadelphia.

“I thought, this is a story that should be told,” Wiley says.

So he spent the next four months developing the first draft of a script, then submitted his work to a writing competition sponsored by the **National Black Theatre Festival**. The contest excluded solo performances, but the judges were so impressed with Wiley's script that he won the top prize anyway.

In 2000, that script became the show **One Noble Journey** and debuted at **Manbites Dog**, a pioneering experimental theater in Durham, North Carolina. Wiley's performance earned rave reviews and made a splash in the mushrooming Raleigh/Durham theater scene. He started getting inquiries. Could he perform the show at this festival, at that school? What were his rates? And did he have any other stories?

Wiley started reading up on history and gathering stories of slavery in Virginia and the Carolinas. He collected local tales and legends, traveling back and forth between NYC and southern states. Realizing he didn't need to be in New York to pursue this new career he was inventing for himself, he soon moved to Durham and never looked back.

Wiley's shows are a staunchly DIY operation. He does his own publicity, hauls his own props, crews his own shows, and performs everywhere: theaters, community centers, classrooms, gymnasiums.

"I have my own microphones and speakers," Wiley says. "All I need is a performance space and a glass of water. And actually, I can get by without the water."

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Wiley is of medium height and build; he typically wears plain clothes and neutral colors when performing. But as critics note, his physical characterizations are just this side of hypnotic. It's the magic trick that great stage actors can do, telling entire stories with bearing, gesture, and body language. His voice caroms through various tones, pitches, and accents as he transforms himself onstage.

In a review of *Dar-He* at the Southern online arts journal CVNC.org, reviewer Alan R. Hall noted Wiley's uncanny ability to portray multiple characters without the use of makeup, costumes, or the other standard signifiers of the stage: "Wiley recreates all of his 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 work of confronting difficult subjects and characters night after night on the road can be emotionally taxing.

In the early days, getting behind the eyes of evil characters — murderers, Klansmen, slaveholders — would take a toll. He would need time after a performance to shift gears. Eventually, he discovered

that it's useful to hold an extended Q&A conversation with the audience after a performance.

“It helps me and the audience both to walk away, to move forward,” he says. “We’re able to have an open dialogue, about not just the play, but where we’re at as a society.”



ARTS MIDWEST; TOP PHOTO BY CHRIS CHARLES FOR CREATIVE SILENCE

Mike Wiley performs dozens of roles in *Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till*. One reviewer wrote: “Wiley recreates all of his characters with a depth and clarity that make each one readily identifiable, and as distinct as an entire cast of players could make them.”

Wiley now has a repertoire of seven one-man shows, any of which he can break out and perform more-or-less on demand. He's also written traditional ensemble plays and has worked with filmmakers to adapt some of his stories into short films. Currently, he is collaborating with award-winning author and playwright **Howard Craft** on a new play called "**Peace of Clay**," about black working class families and the aspirations of a young man coming of age in a Southern city in the 1980s.

But he has turned down prestigious teaching gigs to keep his focus on documentary theater — work he describes as a kind of artistic activism. He recalls how he felt in the 1990s, when the Ku Klux Klan organized a march near his college campus and he struggled with the most productive way to respond.

Eventually, he says, he learned that theater was his answer: Bringing these stories to life onstage could get people of all races to think about the past, the present, and the path forward. It's also a way to shed light on why evil happens — and how the people who carry it out aren't just cartoonish abstractions, but friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

This is particularly illuminating — if uncomfortable — to Wiley's Southern audiences, many of whom might have a personal or family history running alongside the brutal history of racism his shows depict. He had that realization recently, at a performance of *Dar* He — named for a statement Till's great-uncle supposedly made in court.

“It’s intermission,” Wiley says. “Act One ends with one character ordering his brothers to put Emmett Till in the back of a truck. I walk offstage, the lights come up, and all I hear is dozens of people saying, ‘Wow.’ There’s no applause — it’s a really difficult moment to applaud — but you hear a collective gasp.”

“That’s when I know I’ve done my job, because we’re all finally seeing the same thing.”

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