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Actor Mike Wiley singlehandedly brings story of Emmett Till to life in 'Dar He'

Thu., Oct. 10, 2019, 4:15 p.m.



By Azaria Podplesky

azariap@spokesman.com

(509) 459-5024

As an actor in the '90s, Mike Wiley was part of a couple theater companies that took him around the country for performances. While working, he began to notice the roles he, an African-American performer, was being given and the productions that were performed in schools, elementary to college.

Unsatisfied with both, Wiley decided to take matters into his own hands, and Mike Wiley Productions was born. At the same time Mike Wiley, the playwright, was born, too.

Wiley had never had any written work published, but he was always writing creatively. After seeing a contest from the National Black Theatre Festival that promised the winner's play would be read at the festival, Wiley decided to write his first piece.

Wiley researched the lives of Henry Brown, an enslaved man who mailed himself from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia; Harriet Jacobs, a freed slave and abolitionist; and Ellen and William Craft.

Ellen Craft was a fair-skinned African-American woman who posed as a white male slave owner with her husband acting as her slave, and the pair escaped to the north from Georgia. Those stories became "One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom," a solo piece in which Wiley plays every character.

Some time later, he received a letter from the National Black Theatre Festival saying that, though they didn't normally accept solo plays, they were so curious as to how Wiley made this play work, they'd add it to the festival.

"I realized this is actually a production that people like, people enjoy, people learn, people have a good time because what it was doing was telling a story of enslaved people that wasn't hopeless," he said. "In all of my pieces, I try to utilize some of my personality, so I infuse a little bit of comedy, not jokes but humanity that comes out of life, whether it's in the midst of grief you want to laugh, or whether it's in the midst of those moments that life can feel so ridiculous that you have to laugh."

Plays about baseball legend Jackie Robinson and the Montgomery Bus Boycott followed. Then, in late 2003, Wiley was listening to Kanye West's "Through the Wire," a song the rapper wrote and recorded after his jaw was wired shut after a car accident. In the song, West raps, "And just imagine how my girl feel/On the plane scared as hell that her guy look like Emmett Till."

"It angered me because I knew his face could not be anywhere close to Emmett's," Wiley said. "It made me think, 'Man, I wonder how many folks, especially young people, might be listening to this song and thinking about young Emmett in some flippant way because Kanye is comparing his clearly restructured and fine-looking face to that of the gruesome and mutilated face of Emmett Till, a young man who only his mother could perhaps be able to even identify him as once being a human being because of how brutally he was beaten.' I decided I need to create something. I needed to write something."

For the next year, Wiley worked on what would become "Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till," referencing books, including the autobiography of Mamie Till-Bradley, Emmett's mother, journals, newspaper articles and as many firsthand accounts as he could get his hands on to create what was as close to documentary theater as he could.

In "Dar He," Wiley plays all 36 characters, the six or seven main characters and a collection of Till's family members, witnesses and jurors. Wiley doesn't change costumes to mark one character from another. Instead, he relies on voice, posture and where he's standing on the stage to differentiate between characters.

“By the time we are 10, 15 minutes in, people know what character is about to speak before that character even speaks,” he said.

Playing all 36 characters is physically and emotionally exhausting for Wiley because it’s his job as an actor, he believes, to be as truthful to the character and the story as he possibly can, which means he doesn’t shy away from the necessary language or emotion.

Some actors, Wiley said, play a role with a wink and a nod as if to say, “I don’t want you to think I’m really this racist,” but Wiley said that’s not necessary because the audience members know they’re watching a production.

“I want an audience to be able to see fully a truthful character so at the end of the day, they might say, ‘Wow, that really reminded me of my neighbor’ or ‘Wow, that really reminded me of my grandfather’ or ‘Wow, that really reminded me of myself,’ ” he said.

“The only way to do that is to play these characters as fully as I can. It’s like Dr. King said, ‘There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.’ Playing each one of these individuals completely and fully, an audience will see all of those angles of humanity.”

Wiley knows that after a traditional play, audience members are likely to walk to their car, chat about the show with, most often, like-minded people and leave it at that.

But, wanting to solidify the community that’s been created over the course of the show while also give audience members a chance to ask questions and talk about how the show made them feel, Wiley ends his performances with talkbacks.

“I also like people to have an opportunity to let it go,” he said. “I tend to make my talkbacks fun and light, and, yes, we go deep and the conversations get pretty real, as they say, but just like with performances, put yourself in my hands, don’t worry, I’m not going to leave you there. I’m not going to leave you in a place of sorrow or hopelessness. The idea is to create a feeling of hope.”

Twenty years after he started his solo performances, Wiley is excited to bring that feeling of hope and “Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till” to Gonzaga University’s Myrtle Woldson Performing Arts Center on Thursday, his West Coast debut.

“It saddens me that that is the case because I do really believe that this history is not just about the southeast states or the East Coast or middle America,” he said. “These stories are universal in hope and tragedy, so I’m really, really, really excited this is the West Coast premiere.”

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