

Race Relations in Williamsburg, 1955-75

Robin Veder, Editor, assisted by Jennifer Bryant and Eric Heinen

Welcome to the Grassroots Theater Project! This project is a collaboration between Williamsburg residents, students of the College of William and Mary, and the Roadside Theater Company. Together we are making a play about race relations in Williamsburg during the Civil Rights era. How? Folks who have stories to tell about that time are sharing them with students, who will then work with Roadside Theater and the Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project's steering committee to create a show about our own local history. The steering committee is Carol Talbot, Shade Palmer, Iris Lynch, Hermine Pinson, Richard Sherman, Eric Heinen, and Lisa Rayner. The final production will occur in April 1996. This project draws on funding from the Hunt-Scammon endowment at the College and is being sponsored by Neighborhood Connections of James City County, the Williamsburg Regional Library, the Community Action Agency, the JCC Historical Commission, the Citizens for Community Progress and Alternate ROOTS.

During the past month, many individuals in Williamsburg have graciously opened their homes to guests from the community and the college. Big thank yous to all of you who have participated! The interviews and story circles have generated some fascinating insights and personal reminiscences. We are learning that there are many different opinions about the past, and that's okay. We want the whole story, not just one perspective. So, even if you think your outlook is unusual, we still want to hear it. This project is for everyone.

Our meetings have generated more than stories; they have also strengthened old connections and forged new friendships. The students are getting a lot of pleasure from this new, and very personal, way of learning. At the beginning of the project, one of the students, Jennifer Bryant, remarked, "I'm very excited about the story circles and listening and hearing and being a part of this. It really is history making and I can't believe I'm going to be a part of it." Another student, Tevera Stith, was beaming after her story circle with Yvonne and Albert Lee of Newport News. She commented, "I was just like a sponge soaking up all that information and wondering how the times and places they grew up [in] made them who they were, and how the time and place that I grew up [in] will make me. This is college after all."

If you have not yet had a chance to attend a story circle, be sure to sign up to attend one of our last two events on October 30 and November 2. They will both be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Williamsburg Regional Library. If you would like to attend, please contact Bruce McConachie (221-2668) or Robin Veder (253-8097) for more information.



Professional grassroots actress Robbie McCauley (center) works with students Cameron Ayres (right) and James Richardson (left) on techniques for animating stories. Photo by Bruce McConachie.

In the classroom, we are beginning to put our stories into a theatrical form. This is being accomplished with the assistance of William and Mary theater professor Bruce McConachie, and our artists-in-resi-

dence, Theresa Holden and Dudley Cocke of the Roadside Theater, and Robbie McCauley, a performance artist from New York. Dudley was one of the editors of a book about grassroots theater, From the Ground Up. A lot of people have been asking, "What is grassroots theater?" so I thought I would share with you Dudley's explanation. He writes, "Grassroots theater is given its voice by the community from which it arises. The makers of grassroots theater are part of the culture from which the work is drawn. The people who are the subjects of the work are part of its development from inception through presentation. Their stories and histories inform the work, their feedback during the creation process shapes it. The audience is not consumer of, but participant in the performance."

We are all learning that grassroots theater is a very different kind of experience than traditional theater. The process of sharing stories and working together is more important than the final product. One of our students, Eric Heinen, feels that he has found his calling in grassroots theater. After a workshop Eric commented "It seemed that I was part of a whole and that what I did was for the others, and not just for me. I guess that this is some of the nature of theater with the people rather than at the people." Even though the story circles are almost done, we will be inviting you to participate in creating this play by attending open rehearsals. The first event of this type will be the Potluck . . .

Potluck

Everyone who has participated is invited to attend a potluck supper on Saturday, November 18 at 6:00 p.m. at Toano Middle School. You might be surprised to see all the familiar faces who have also been a part of this project. The students are looking forward to reuniting with new friends from story circle evenings, and the directors of the project are eager to meet all of you in person. During the evening, the students will present some of the theatrical pieces that they are weaving from your stories, to be followed by some open discussion. We are really excited about sharing this work-in-progress with you. I can tell you, the results from our workshops have already been incredible! If you would like to come, please plan to bring a main dish, salad or dessert for 5-6 people. Please RSVP to our organizer, Kristen Schorr (564-9253). She can also help you if you need transportation to and from the potluck. See you there!

Calendar

October 30

Monday, 7:30 Story Circle at the Williamsburg Regional Library

November 2

Thursday, 7:30 Story Circle at the Williamsburg Regional Library

November 18

Saturday, 6:00 Potluck at Toano Middle School 7817 Richmond Rd.

February 26

Monday, 7:00 Open Rehearsal at the Williamsburg Regional Library Theater

March 18

Friday, 7:00 Open Rehearsal at the Williamsburg Regional Library Theater

April 11-April 13

Thursday-Saturday, Performances at PBK Theater, The College of William and Mary

Stories & Quotes

"The experience the black children had was so much richer when the schools were segregated, that that was their own and so there was real ownership of the responsibility for educating the children. So, there's just some things that I remember that really had an impact on me in the sense of what great leadership we had in the community, but still I think many of the black people felt they lost. They did not feel like winners in the integration process." - audience member at Junbug/ Jack

"And then the A&P, I guess became [integrated], which was located down where the back of the post office is now, and had a big black patronage because it was convenient, you could walk there from the Highland Park Area. And I always laughed about that store because there came a time when the two groups who lived near it were the blacks in Highland Park and the really grand old dames, the widow ladies of Williamsburg, who had their big houses near there, so it had no white middle class patronage, it had, you know, the poorest blacks and the richest of these old white ladies all shopping together, and it seemed to work ok."- Thad Tate

I remember, down at James Willard Johnson, I had a class, they were all boys who came to me for reading every day, I got to know them very, very well... And as the kids get adjusted to coming back to school, they want to know everything, and so I always started them off by talking about what they had done during the summer and where they worked and all of this. I remember when we went back to school, after the summer, I think it was about six or seven boys...was right there for the first day. And I was asking them, I said 'Sherman, what did you do

this summer?' And Sherman looked at me and he shook his head like this, he said, 'Mrs. Belpree, I had had it hard.' I said, 'Well, what did you do?' He said, 'I got a job with this construction company.' I said, 'You didn't like that? Didn't they pay you well?' He said, 'Yes.' They paid him well. They had a white boy, same as about Sherman's age. And he said, 'You know, it looked like every time there was a hole to go in, I would be the one to go in and get in the hole. And it seemed to me like some of those holes were getting deeper and deeper.' I said, 'What do you mean by deeper?' He said, 'Sometimes you could be get in a sewer line or something that you didn't know was there and they have to dig all around that, and go down deeper and all of this.' I says, 'I didn't see anything wrong with that.' He said, 'One day, I was so far down in the hole until I couldn't see anything but the blue sky.' And he said, 'I was working I heard this strange noise. And I says "What is that, what is that noise?"' And he looked up, and he said it was crows flying over. Just flying back and forth, backwards and forwards. And when he looked he said, 'It looked like I saw a larger one and he was squawking, squawking...' And he went on, and he made that sound and we laughed, because he sounded just like the bird. And he said, 'Look at him. Look at him. Look at the nigger in the hole. Look at him. Look at him. Look at the nigger in the hole.' He said to himself, he said, 'Mrs. Belpree, I said, if I ever get out of this hole, today it will be no more work.' He said, 'You will not have any trouble out of me learning anything. You will not have any more trouble.' But when he start mocking that crow, I thought I would die, and oh it was just something, I wish you could hear him tell it. -

Sarah Wright Belpree

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