

Spotlight shines on black and white 'Junebug/Jack' a grassroots musical

By Bill Tolbert

Folks who lived in this area during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and '70s likely remember those days as tense, confused and angry. The memories likely are shaped by which side of the debate they supported.

Bruce McConachie, a professor of theater and American studies at the College of William & Mary, wants to draw upon those memories for a new, grassroots theater project.

To kick off the project, two theater groups will put on a production Sept. 8 and 9 at the Williamsburg Regional Library Arts Center. Roadside Theatre Company is based in the coalfields of eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. Junebug Theater Project is an African American group based in New Orleans.

The two will present "Junebug/Jack," a musical about two heroes, one black and one white, who courageously and humorously overcome powerful forces. Tickets for the Friday and Saturday night performances go on sale Aug. 28.

After each performance, the

actors will invite members of the community to participate in story circles to share local experiences from the Civil Rights era. Then, McConachie and members of the W&M Theater Department will take the stories and songs from the story circles and shape them into a script, producing a play with W&M students in April 1996.

In determining a story line for the first local production, McConachie got lots of suggestions from locals. One was the Civil War era in Williamsburg and how that war impacted the local community. A second was a look at the restoration of the Historic Area and how that displaced many black families from their homes.

McConachie opted to highlight the more recent Civil Rights period. "People said, 'Maybe that's too fresh. You'll ruffle some feathers,'" McConachie recalled. "That got me interested immediately."

With advice from Roadside Theatre, McConachie has put together a mailing list of about 70 people who were involved on both sides of the local Civil Rights debate. They've been invited to attend the September

play and participate in the story circles. Others are invited to tell their stories. In all, he'd like to have views from more than 100 locals.

"I've had a lot of community support in putting this together," McConachie said. He singled out Ronnie Nowak from Neighborhood Connections in James City County, Christie Matthews at Colonial Williamsburg, and Bill Bryant and Lois Hornsby from Citizens for Community Progress.

"Everybody's story won't be used in the script. But the more we have, the better and the more inclusive the show will be," he said. "I'm especially interested in the personal dislocations caused by desegregation."

He anticipates that the animosities of that period may surface in the script. But could the project open old wounds, dividing some segments of the population?

"Our production will not please everybody," he admitted. "I view this as a chance to heal old wounds rather than increasing barriers. On the other hand, we as a community need to face the past squarely before that healing can occur."



Jeff Whelstone

Junebug Productions and Roadside Theatre perform their original collaboration "Junebug/Jack". Left to right are Shawn Jackson, Kim Neal, Kenneth C. Raphael, and Nancy Jeffrey.

Grassroots theaters differ from the more familiar community theaters that present popular shows. "Grassroots theater gives voice to the community from which it arises," McConachie explained. "It deals substantially with the traditions, stories and songs that are indigenous to a specific place and presents them back to the community from which they are drawn. It is linked to the progressive struggles for social and political equity."

Of the more than 100 grassroots theater groups around the country, Roadside is one of the oldest. "Because they are linked

closely to their community, they are weathering the cultural wars a bit better than many arts groups," McConachie said.

Roadside has had some success in helping establish other grassroots theaters. Four members of Roadside will be in residence at W&M during the academic year to help with the project.

Representatives of the group warned McConachie the plan to produce a play by April is ambitious. By the time he gets stories and other information from locals, "I'll be lucky if we have a script by the end of the year," he

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responded, "but my primary interest is in old letters. Do you ever come across any?" His answer startled me.

"Just a few days ago, a young man came into my shop and said he had some old letters dating back to 1774 that he wanted to get rid of. He showed me five or six of them, but to tell the truth, I didn't know anything about them and told him I wasn't interested."

I was certain my next question would be a waste of time, but nevertheless, I asked, "Do you know anything about the man?"

To my great, good fortune, he did. The man who owned the covers taught school in the area, and the dealer gave me his name. I was off and running, and I do mean running, almost, but not quite, forgetting the lamb chops I had come to buy.

I flew back to the trailer, dropped off the groceries, and picked up Gerry. We got into the car and drove to Hartford, where I couldn't get on the phone fast enough. The young man still had the "old letters." We made an appointment for that evening, and I literally willed the time to pass quickly.

He lived in a Hartford suburb. When we arrived at the house, we were ushered into the kitchen, where were greeted by a sight we'll never forget. In the center of the room was a large table completely covered with his "old letters," hundreds of stampless covers. Stampless covers are folded lettersheets used prior to 1847.

My eyes picked out a large number of covers bearing extremely rare cancellations. The majority of the covers were addressed to "Andrew Kingsbury, Treasurer, State of Connecticut," but that didn't mean much to me at that time. What did mean a lot were the number of letters signed by the four Connecticut signers of the Declaration of Independence.

I was actually sweating, but

overwhelmed. And we were pressed for living space in our trailer.

I knew we couldn't keep it all, so I borrowed a suitcase from my mother and filled it with everything having to do with the Connecticut Western Reserve, genealogies and Indians. I made a number of phone calls to several local antiques dealers and sold the suitcase full of papers to a local dealer.

From Hartford, we drove up through Vermont, Massachusetts and Maine, going through old attics and antiques shops, always looking for covers or stamps. Finally it was time to get back to Arizona. Once more, we stopped in Hartford to say goodbye to my mother.

While we were visiting with her, I happened to mention to Gerry that I'd never asked the man in East Hartford if he had any more covers. She was certain there couldn't be any more.

I called and asked him if he had any more covers. The answer came quickly: five full barrels in the basement. I couldn't believe it. While I don't recall the trip to his home, I do remember the trip back to the trailer in Vernon.

There was so much material that I had to put the top down on the convertible to get everything in the car. We literally filled the floor of the trailer with covers and documents, which numbered at least 4,000.

After buying the contents of the five barrels, which did represent

The catalog was subsequently revised.

We kept those covers for many years. Then they sold at auction in New York City. Any time I happen to see a cover addressed to "Andrew Kingsbury, Treasurer, State of Connecticut," you can pretty much bet I know who saw it first!

Poriss is a freelance writer who recently relocated to James City County.

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said. "We hope to cast the show with students by February, then begin rehearsals and put it on by April."

"Our aim is a fair representation of the successes and failures, the joys and antagonisms resulting from the campaign to desegregate the schools, stores and local governments, as told by those who lived through it," he added. "I expect we will have as many different points of view represented as we have participants in the project."

Performances of "Junebug/Jack" are scheduled for 8 p.m. Sept. 8 and 9. For information or reservations, call 229-4198.

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