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Angles of the Truth

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Mike Wiley stands before a picture of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie. Wiley stars in the one-man show 'Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till,' which is being presented at the Deep Dish Theater at University Mall.

Staff photo by Leslie Barbour

By JESSICA ROCHA, STAFF WRITER

Fifty years ago, a black woman in Chicago put her 14-year-old son on a train to rural Mississippi to visit family.

"Bo Till, you didn't even kiss me goodbye," Mamie Till Mobley tells her son, Emmett. "How do you know I'll ever see you again?"

Mamie told her son to mind his business, to "put a handle on those yeses and nos" with "ma'ams" and "sirs," and not to talk back to any white folks.

And when his stutter gets the best of him, Mamie said, just whistle it out.

But Bobo's whistle got directed at Carolyn Bryant, the wife of Roy Bryant Jr., who owned the local feed store.

A few days later the boy -- Emmett "Bobo" Till -- was kidnapped, beaten, killed and then thrown into the Tallahatchie River, where the body was found a few days later.

Till's death, his mother's decision to have an open-casket funeral, and a trial that acquitted two white men on murder charges shed new light on the country's legacy of racism.

Later, those same two men admitted they killed Till in an interview with Look magazine.

The story is now dissected in a play at Deep Dish Theater called "Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till," produced by EbzB Productions and Mike Wiley Productions.

The play isn't so much a condemnation of Till's murder as it is an attempt to come to terms with the tragedy by exploring what took place that day from different perspectives.

That's about 22 perspectives in all, said Mike Wiley, who wrote and stars in the one-man play.

"I wanted it to be a play where we see different camera angles," Wiley said. "We see different angles of the perceived truth."

Wiley plays every character in the 90-minute, one-man performance.

That includes Roy Bryant Jr., and J.W. Milam, the two men who later confessed to killing Till.

Wiley said that in order to make the characters believable, he had to try to understand the perspectives of Bryant and Milam.

Just as Till's Aunt Lizzie explains to the family that sometimes, in order to eat, one has to kill a chicken, Roy and J.W. say that in order to protect their way of life, Emmett had to be killed to protect white heritage.

"It ain't that we want to kill him (the chicken), it's that we had to," Aunt Lizzie says in the play.

Playing 22 characters requires strict choreography so the characters can fold into each other, but with enough physical cues that the audience can identify the changes. In a dance scene, Wiley switches characters between two people who are dancing with each other.

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During Till's murder, the audience sees Roy and J.W. beat Till. It also sees Till take the beating. The audience also sees different versions of what may have happened at Bryant's store that led up to the whistling: Was Bo Till just working out his stutter? Was he acting on a dare to make a pass at a white woman? Was there some innocent flirtation between the two?

To prepare for the physically demanding performance, Wiley read lines while running on a treadmill.

"During some of the more physical parts, I would up the speed and push myself...to make sure I have the breath support," he said.

A white handkerchief serves as Wiley's primary prop: It serves as a chicken that he chases, he dabs sweat with it to show the heat, and he drapes it as an apron when he's playing a woman.

Wiley said he started writing the play in the fall of 2004.

Soon after, Till's body was exhumed to see whether any traces of evidence remained that would link anyone else to his death.

Music and photos projected onto a screen set each scene, from Bryant's store to the courtroom and then Till's funeral with an open casket so that people could see Till's mutilated face, which his mother displayed to show the disfigured face and cruelty of racism.

Though the play and its story have many dark moments, director and co-producer Serena Ebhardt said it's also "deeply hopeful."

"It's not about brutality so much as about the opportunity," she said. Ebhardt hopes civic organizations, church and university groups come out to see the play in an effort to start a dialogue, especially in light of the Duke lacrosse team rape allegations and racial violence that continues today around the country.

"This stuff is happening every single day," Ebhardt said. "This piece has the opportunity to do some healing."

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