Hate stews again on Mississippi's front burner

CHAPEL HILL — Fifty years after the gruesome slaying in Mississippi of handsome 14-year-old Emmett Till, a black Chicagoan, actor and playwright Mike Wiley once more focuses a glaring spotlight on the heinous crime. Based on extensive scholarly research, the young thespian's one-man vehicle "Dar He" chronicles the murder, the rigged courtroom spectacle in which the killers were exonerated and the eventual confession of the two white-trash "peckerwoods" who administered their own version of justice.

In this astonishing tour de force, Wiley reveals the persona of every individual, no matter how peripheral, whose life story played a part in this monumental tragedy. Clad in rough clothing, wearing work boots and pants held up by suspenders, this matchless actor creates the voices, expressions and body language of an incredible parade of characters.

He is carefree Emmett, ebullient baseball fan, all excited about visiting his Uncle Moses, Aunt Lizzie and other Delta kinfolk and "too big for his britches … too big for Mississippi." Soft-spoken, animal-loving, stuttering Emmett who allegedly crosses the color line by whistling at a white woman.

He is Emmett's mama, Mamie Bradley, whose premonition comes true. "Have you ever sent a loved son on vacation and had him returned to you in a pine box, so horribly battered and water-logged that someone needs to tell you this sickening sight is your son — lynched?"

In turn, he becomes members of the Bryant clan: Carolyn, who lies about the incident and on the stand; drunken, hate-mongering half brothers J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant Jr., who beat their hapless prey to a bloody pulp, then toss Emmett's body, weighted down with a cotton gin fan, off the Tallahatchie River bridge; and Eula Lee Bryant testifying on behalf of her killer sons.

He's the lawman investigating Emmett's disappearance; he's courageous Moses, pointing during his testimony to Milam and Bryant. "Dar he" — "There he is."

He is juror number 12, disdainfully mocking Emmett's family and friends; the prosecuting attorney vilifying Emmett, twisting the truth, protecting the white heritage while putting the NAACP on trial; and Judge Curtis Swango, a man highly praised for his supposed "fairness toward the Negro." All of these, and dozens of others caught up in civil right's tempestuous times, Wiley portrays with telling accuracy.

The production's interactive multimedia design, featuring a sepia-toned photographic slide background and eerily realistic soundtrack, adds gravitas to a static but constantly changing set. The performance, as haunting as Bob Dylan's mournful "The Death of Emmett Till," is even more gripping than the television documentaries "The Murder of Emmett Till" on American Experience and director Keith Beauchamps' "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till."

Disposition: The accused, both acquitted, died years later. In 2004, the FBI reopened the Emmett Till murder case. In 2005, the boy's shattered corpse was exhumed to test for DNA evidence, which would allow the pursuit of murder charges against surviving suspects Carolyn Bryant and field hands who might have assisted Milam and Bryant.

Reenacted with unflinching truthfulness by a young man born long after the killing occurred, "Dar He — The Lynching of Emmett Till" is a true story that must never be forgotten. Will justice be done at last? The jury is still out.

— Susan Farrington

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEEP DISH THEATER

Mike Wiley stars in Deep Dish Theater's production of 'Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till.'

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