

MIKE WILEY

One's a Crowd

He's a solo actor who plays all the parts—including booker, tour manager and, above all, showman

BY SCOTT WALTERS



Wiley in *One Noble Journey*, a piece about Henry "Box" Brown.

VERSATILITY HAS BEEN THE HALLMARK OF North Carolina actor Mike Wiley's career. "As a performer, I've always thought of myself as a Swiss Army knife," Wiley chuckles. "If there was a production that required someone who could play a bunch of different characters, I was the guy who got the call."

Over time, that versatility has propelled him into a unique theatrical niche. Wiley began to write and perform his own solo plays; he launched his own successful eponymous production company; and, most recently, he served as the 2010 Lehman Brady Visiting Joint Chair Professor in Documentary Studies and American Studies at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Next year will see the debut of Wiley's first play written for an ensemble, *The Parchman Hour*. A historical drama about the Freedom

Riders, it will be part of the mainstage season at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Wiley, 38, creates performances that bring to life key events and figures in African-American history, rang-

ing from *Brown v. Board of Education*, to the Emmett Till lynching, to the Montgomery bus boycott and the life of Henry "Box" Brown, as well as a dramatization of Timothy Tyson's award-winning book *Blood Done Sign My Name*. In these solo pieces, he often plays as many as several dozen characters and shifts between them with ease, clarity and sometimes astonishing rapidity.

This is more than mere versatility—it's virtuosity. And though Wiley cites some of the usual solo-show suspects (Anna Devereaux Smith, Spalding Gray) as influences, he also credits a few unexpected forebears: Bob Newhart and Bill Cosby.

"Newhart was amazing," Wiley declares. "When he did telephone conversations, he created the character on the other end of the line so vividly that you knew exactly what that guy was saying. And Cosby created dozens of characters from his childhood simply through changes in his voice." The key, Wiley adds, is that "they both were really funny. Comedy is an important part of what I do, even though the subject matter is usually pretty serious. People want to laugh, and humor opens the heart to deeper understanding."

Wiley didn't start out holding the stage by himself. His early career included performing in touring Shakespeare companies and children's theatre troupes, using his physical and vocal versatility to create a variety of distinctive characters.

Wiley reminds us that we are all actors and observers, oppressors and the oppressed, participants in a larger world and reflective thinkers.

The touring gave him a behind-the-scenes education in what's involved in running a production company: booking performances, arranging housing, composing riders to contracts, working with presenters—all the myriad details that go into a career on the road. At the same time, he was feeling frustrated at the lack of opportunities to tell important stories from African-American history. Then one day, inspiration arrived—literally gift-wrapped.

"I was performing in a children's production of *Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus*, in which the title character received an enormous gift box. When she opened it, I popped out as her gift!" Wiley remembers, grinning. "I was a black-in-a-box!" As an opening night present, one of Wiley's fellow actors gave him a postcard with a picture of Henry "Box" Brown on it. That prompted Wiley to learn the true story of Brown, a Virginia slave who in 1849 mailed himself to freedom in Philadelphia. "I knew right then that this was a story I needed to tell," Wiley says.

Although he had never written a play before, Wiley turned Brown's story into

a drama that he could perform himself—"one that would use all my skills," he says. The result was *One Noble Journey*, which he submitted to the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, N.C., which hosts a Readers' Theatre coordinated by the august Frank Sylvera Writers' Workshop.

Soon he got a call saying that, though they had never before included a solo play in the festival, the selection panel wanted to accept it for production. There were many well-known actors who would be available to perform the piece at the festival, he was told. Who would he like to cast?

"I told them I wanted to perform it myself!" Wiley recalls, and the gamble paid off—Wiley soon found himself in demand to perform the piece in schools and communities throughout the region.

His solo success became a conflict for him, though, when was accepted at UNC-Chapel Hill. He tried to juggle the demands of an MFA program with the requests for his solo work, but his professors pressured him to give up the outside gigs. "It was understandable," Wiley admits. "They wanted me to focus. But at the same time, these

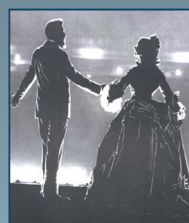
performances were important to me." Wiley told them he'd stop—but he never did. He felt positively driven to tell his stories.

"I do these plays because I believe stereotypes and racism arise from fear—because we are scared of the unknown," Wiley says, warming to the topic. "When we were children, we were scared of the dark, because we didn't know what was there. We thought that box in the corner was a monster. But when the lights came on and we saw it was just a box, the fear disappeared. The same logic can be applied to our perceptions of other cultures or religions or races. We turn the light on. We figure out who they are. We learn about them. Then we're not afraid of them anymore."

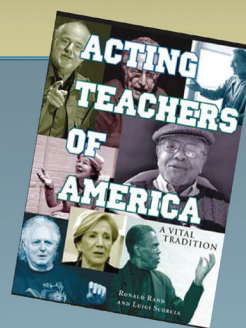
Wiley's original plan was that, when he graduated, the solo pieces would provide him with income so that he would have time to audition for films and plays. It didn't quite work out that way. "Pretty soon, the solo work was all I was doing," he recalls. So he began writing new plays: *A Game Apart*, about baseball player Jackie Robinson; *Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till*; *Tired Souls: King and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*; and *Life Is So*

THE ACTING INTENSIVE

GATELY/POOLE ACTING STUDIO



"An actor must work all his life, cultivate his mind, train his talents systematically, develop his character. He may never despair and never relinquish his main purpose- to love his art with all his strength and love it unselfishly." Konstantin Stanislavski.



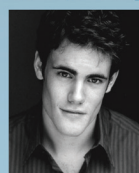
Actors Trained

- James Gandolfini** Emmy Award
- Roger Bart** Tony Award
- Mark Wolf** Obie Award
- Cynthia Martell** Outer Critics Award
- Michael McGuire** Tony & Drama Desk Award
- Ed Cunningham** Joseph Jefferson Award



Intensive Acting Training Meisner Acting Technique

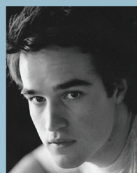
- Summer & Winter intensives include:
- Comprehensive acting training
 - Audition & cold reading technique
 - Fitzmaurice Voice Technique
 - Williamson Movement Technique
 - On Camera technique
 - Schedule & dates visit us at:



Micah Alberti
ALL MY CHILDREN



Amanda Seyfried
MAMA MIA



Justin Mantell
BOSTON LEGAL

Contact: www.gatelypoole.com

Good, about a slave's grandson who learned to read at the age of 98. Willy-nilly, Wiley had become a theatrical entrepreneur.

"Everything I learned by paying attention during my touring days came into play," Wiley explains. He created professional marketing materials and a website, contacted schools, communities and regional theatres, and handled every detail of production. He has performed in spaces large and small, from New York City to West Jefferson, N.C., from the Majestic Theatre in Dallas to a backyard barbecue. "If you have an audience that's open to the message, a 10-by-10 space, and the fee," Wiley says, "I'm your man." Mike Wiley Productions has grown to the point where last year it grossed more than \$120,000, which allowed Wiley to start a family and "employ my artist friends, so that we all have the opportunity to live our art."

Wiley is both a businessman and an expert showman. His shows are sophisticated blends of narrative, audience participation and wit. For instance, in *Brown v. Board of Education: Over Fifty Years Later*, Wiley invites audience members onstage to play a variety of roles, and stays in character himself while



Wiley in *Dar He: The Story of Emmett Till*.

integrating the volunteers into dramatic events in a way that is non-threatening and humorous. And then, with a flick of the dramaturgical wrist, the humor is transformed into tragic poignancy, moments that provoke empathy and understanding. In such instances, identity is fluid: Audience members play African-Americans, whites, young

people and old, heroes and villains, regardless of their own personal characteristics.

Sometimes Wiley passes a character that he himself is playing along to an audience member. Spectators caught up in the drama seem to absorb Wiley's versatility by osmosis—they feel just as capable as he is of seeing the world through the eyes of someone entirely different than themselves. Wiley reminds us that we are all actors and observers, oppressors and the oppressed, participants in a larger world and reflective thinkers. In short, we are citizens who both create our own environment and are created by it.

At a time when initiatives like the NEA-sponsored New Play Development Program at Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage is exploring ways to strengthen the infrastructure for new work and encourage diversity in programming, an artist like Mike Wiley offers an effective model of production that stands outside the traditional institutional approach. He embodies a commitment to diversity in all aspects of his work—and, as an artist-entrepreneur in control of the means of production, he demonstrates the sustainability and creativity that comes from artistic independence. As he puts it, "I give audiences what they want in order to give them what they need." ☒

Scott Walters is an associate professor of drama at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. He is the co-author of *Introduction to Play Analysis* and the director of the Center for Rural Arts Development and Leadership Education.

ADD 1 AWARD-WINNING *drama* TO YOUR SEASON

A House Divided

by Sean David Bennett

An American Wife

by Michael Downend & Karen Blomain

Ceremonies of Prayer

by Evan Guilford-Blake

A Field of Daisies

by Rebecca Ryland

Free Perusal Reading Available Exclusively at

Heartland Plays, Inc.

www.HeartlandPlays.com

For additional information E-mail: playsnow@heartlandplays.com

Copyright of American Theatre is the property of Theatre Communications Group and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.