

Students see enrichment series performance

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You could hear a pin drop in the crowded Temple Theatre as actor Mike Wiley knelt on one side of the stage and quietly recited The Lord's Prayer, recounting the beginning of slave Abraham Galloway's harrowing voyage to freedom.

Galloway and his friend were facing imminent death — wondering if sailors approaching their hiding place in a secluded hold of the ship would smoke them out with toxic gas. And whether their painstaking preparations for that likelihood could possibly keep them alive.

"The Fire of Freedom," a one-man, one-act play written by Howard Craft and performed by Wiley, was a public presentation organized by Temple Theatre and Central Carolina Community College as part of the college's ongoing series to engage university transfer students with new ideas and experiences.

Students approached the performance from different perspectives. The focus seemed clear for classes studying American history and literature. But there were also sociology students trying to understand institutional racism and communications classes drawing lessons from the actor about public speaking and interpersonal communications.

No matter what questions they brought to the performance, all



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Actor Mike Wiley performs in "The Fire of Freedom," a one-man, one-act play. The performance was organized by Temple Theatre and Central Carolina Community College as part of the college's ongoing series to engage university transfer students with new ideas and experiences.

sat together for almost an hour as Wiley transformed from one character into another, tracing the life of Galloway from captivity in the 19th century South to freedom in Philadelphia — and then on an unlikely odyssey that eventually brought him to the seat of power as one of the first African-American members of the North Carolina legislature.

Along his remarkable journey, Galloway risked his life behind enemy lines recruiting black soldiers for the Union army during the Civil War and helped lead a political movement promoting full citizenship

rights for African Americans, a mission that even landed him in a historic White House meeting with President Abraham Lincoln.

Issues in the play weren't always comfortable, but that was the point. "What I like about Mike's shows is that he takes a serious subject that comes with a lot of emotion — or that is raw or taboo — and disarms us and makes us vulnerable," said Bianka Stumpf, CCCC's history and social sciences lead instructor who also directs the cultural enrichment program. "That's because he's funny and does unusual

things like bring people on stage."

It's no surprise that Wiley's work has such an impact on students; education has been a guiding force throughout his career. Though the artist now living in Pittsboro has performed in theaters around the country and even appeared several times on television, he remains a popular draw at schools from elementary to college. He has crafted shorter, "student" versions of his full-length plays, published study guides for teachers and incorporated "talkbacks," short question-

and-answer sessions, into his appearances.

Questions during "The Fire of Freedom" talkback were all over the map — from details about Galloway's life to how long it took to rehearse the play. Then someone asked Wiley when he decided to become an actor. It was in the sixth grade, Wiley told the audience, when he was asked to perform the role of Abraham Lincoln. As he delivered some of his lines as the Great Emancipator, his mother couldn't contain herself. "My mother said, 'That's my baby!'" Wiley recalled. "From

that point, I wanted to be an actor."

Because his dramatic presentations have such an impact on students, Wiley has become a regular in CCCC's enrichment series. This mid-November performance of "The Fire of Freedom" was only the second ever — the play held its world premiere less than one week earlier in Chapel Hill — but Wiley has visited CCCC audiences many times before, most recently performing "Breach of Peace" in Sanford last fall.

Stumpf says Wiley's impact on her students lasts well beyond the final curtain. In fact, when the talkback ends and everyone leaves the theater, it's more like hitting "pause" than "stop."

"The next time you have class with those students, they feel a degree of comfort and openness to discuss difficult historical realities, because he's made it accessible," Stumpf explained. "The conversations about controversial issues in history class or race in sociology class are more earnest and candid after the play."

Wiley's appearance was made possible by funding from the North Carolina Arts Council through a Lee County Arts Council Grassroots Grant. It was hosted by Producing Artistic Director Peggy Taphorn and the Temple Theatre.

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