

CVNC REVIEW by Byron Woods

CHANGING SAME: THE COLD-BLOODED MURDER OF BOOKER T. SPICELY

CHAPEL-HILL, NC – It's one of the dirtier secrets of the Second World War: A number of Black American soldiers died in uniform, on American soil, before they ever saw battle, in racially-fueled conflicts across the South. One night in January 1942, at least 13 unarmed soldiers were killed and dozens more injured when a white MP officer incited a riot outside a movie theater in downtown Alexandria, Louisiana, an event that became known as the Lee Street Massacre.

The list continues as Lt. Mitchell Byrd dispassionately briefs his squad of Army intelligence officers at the outset of **StreetSigns Center's** new historical drama, **Changing Same** by playwright and performer **Mike Wiley** and award-winning dramatist **Howard L. Craft**: "Pvt. Charles Recco, shot by a bus driver in Beaumont, Texas, 1942. Pvt. Henry Williams, shot to death by a bus driver in Mobile, Alabama, 1943. Pvt. Edward Green, shot to death by a bus driver in Alexandria, Louisiana. March 1944."

That brings him to his uncomfortable present assignment at Camp Butner, North Carolina: the death of one Pvt. Booker T. Spicely, shot four nights earlier, in July 1944, by a white public bus driver, Herman Lee Council, in Durham.

Ramrod straight and unambiguously in command, Byrd minces no words as he gives his troops their orders.

"The Army cannot have another Lee Street, and the Booker T. Spicely situation in Durham has the potential to become that." Since Council won't be convicted by an all-white Southern jury, "[t]he question then, for the Army, is: How will the Negroes in Durham react? If they react violently or riot, the white southerners will act in kind. Racial violence could then spread not only through the South but throughout the Army as well."

And lest we forget, in September 1944 World War II is still going on. Succinctly, Byrd concludes, "Justice for Pvt. Spicely is not our mandate... Our mandate is to win this war."



"Changing Same" Guitarist, Corbie Hill with Mike Wiley

We've come to expect this degree of historical granularity – and conscience-probing social criticism – in Wiley's theatrical creations. His earliest large-ensemble works included the 2011 music theater drama **The Parchman Hour**, which documented the unlikely survival strategies the Freedom Riders adopted in 1961 during their forced tenure at Mississippi's notorious state penitentiary, and a 2018 full-stage adaptation of *Blood Done Sign My Name*, **Timothy Tyson's** best-selling historical memoir of racial unrest following the 1970 murder of **Henry Marrow** in Oxford, North Carolina.

Most recently, Wiley's become known for a series of collaborations.

Leaving Eden, a music theater work with songwriter **Laurelyn Dossett**, premiered at **PlayMakers Repertory Company** in 2018. *Peace of Clay*, his first team-up with Craft, bowed at **Theatre Raleigh** in 2021, prior to their subsequent projects including this show and an upcoming holiday production, *The Christmas Case of Hezekiah Jones*, at **PlayMakers Rep.**

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Before all of these, though, Wiley established his career by writing and performing a remarkable series of one-person shows, meticulously researched investigations that elevated and illuminated critical but insufficiently remembered episodes in Black American history. These form the spine in works including *One Noble Journey*, his biography of the self-emancipated Henry “Box” Brown, *Tired Souls: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, and his masterpiece, *Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till*.

Changing Same celebrates a return to the form of those early triumphs, not only in Wiley’s incisive deep dive on the historical subject matter, but his singularly unlikely achievements in its performance.

For, as with *Dar He* and his original, solo version of *Blood Done Sign My Name*, Wiley once again single-handedly invokes (aside from the back porch blues and folk stylings of his accompanist, guitarist **Corbie Hill**) an entire community of far-flung characters, differing in age, gender, race and social strata on stage, each of whom has witnessed the central events in the work from a different vantage point.

Given his protean abilities as an actor and an uncanny mimic, I wrote years ago that Wiley’s solo shows usually had a longer and more convincing cast of characters than most large-ensemble productions in the region. Here, under **Joseph Megel**’s trademark discerning direction, Wiley plays Lt. Byrd, above – and the 24 other characters (count ‘em!) who speak to us over 80 years, through this 70-minute production – as ever, without a major costume or makeup change.

As a result, among its other achievements, *Changing Same* is also a memorable master class in acting technique and range.

When the heat from an unstable and certainly unrepentant racist radiates off stage from the same human form that, moments later, portrays his victim – a friendly, confident, young Black soldier on leave, flirting with a woman on a bus – a sharp, unlikely meditation on the inseparability and interdependence of all life blossoms.

It fills out even further when Wiley effortlessly morphs from Gideon Storm, a sinewy, acerbic 99-year-old narrator who walks us down the long, dark corridor of years in his memory, through Byrd’s candid and breathtakingly dismissive military expedience, and the careless, casual racism of Council’s big sister, Nonie.

Chuck Catotti’s atmospheric lights and **Skyler Clay**’s evocative projections illuminate and frame the four-chambered heart of **Dave Griffie**’s set, as **Michael Betts II** and **Naveed Moeed**’s sound design effectively veers from the subliminal to the stark.

In other sequences, Wiley connects the smug self-interest of the affluent **Isaiah Hart**, a Black businessman who’s biggest fear is that **Spicely**’s murder might somehow upset his own economic apple cart, to **Spicely**’s brother, **Robert**, as he struggles over what, if anything, he should write to **Thurgood Marshall**, then a rising attorney with the NAACP, who will assist in Council’s prosecution.

Courtroom testimony is interspersed among news updates from **The Carolina Times**, the town’s only Black-owned newspaper. In their midst, **Melveena Jones**, a devout, no-nonsense Black matriarch, reads her time as she snaps a bowl of green beans on her back porch: “I don’t know what the answer is, or what it’s going to take for white folks to treat us like human beings... Now we got this trial coming up, and as much as I want to believe in my heart of hearts that white folks gon’ do right, I seen them do wrong too many times to have as much as a mustard seed of hope.”

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After a moment's pause, she adds, "That don't mean there ain't no hope, just that Melveena Jones cain't see it."

She pauses again. "But I don't know everything. God does. Pharaoh's heart was hard, too, and God made him do right. Amen?"

Among these divergent cultural and narrative threads, whose interweaving's recall the notable documentary plays of the Tectonic Theater Project, Gideon Storm returns to interconnect all of these to us, in the audience. His voice rises, rings and cracks in an emotionally frank, and frankly harrowing, closing direct address, one that is best experienced in person instead of being quoted here.

But before that final reckoning, Storm's initial words continue to resonate throughout the piece: "White men...killing unarmed Black folk – and nothing happening to them as far as any kind of justice – is older than the Stars and Stripes," he reminds us at the outset. "This ain't no new story; this ain't no new truth," Storm soberly says, before adding, with a mouth seemingly filled with the acrid taste of ash, "[T]his tragedy, in many ways, is the same soup reheated."

It's hard not to conclude that what Storm later terms a "soup of racism and hatred," with "the worst aftertaste in the world" is still being served up – and greedily gulped down – by too much of the American body politic.

But what can possibly grow and thrive on such a toxic diet?

Perhaps it is our fate to find out. Perhaps, since so many have been feeding on it all along, we already know the answer.

Mike Wiley's Changing Same will resume performances November 13-17 at the Brody Theatre in Branson Hall at Duke University.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Byron Woods

Byron Woods is an award-winning journalist and critic who has covered the arts in central North Carolina since the mid-1990s, with over 1,900 stories published to date in regional newspapers and online media including Durham's INDY Week and Raleigh's News & Observer, and national and international publications including Back Stage, Dance Magazine, Downbeat, Howround.com, InTheater and the Village Voice. Selected honors include two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in theater and dance criticism, two National Critics Institute fellowships at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and awards from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, the North Carolina Press Association and, most recently, a 2022 Green Eyeshade Award in arts criticism from the Society of Professional Journalists. Woods has served six times (so far) as critic in residence and clinician in short-course intensives on theater criticism in various regions of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, and taught arts journalism and criticism at UNC Greensboro and in private seminars. He earned an M.A. in Communication Studies with a Performance Studies concentration from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1995.