

Theater provides thought-provoking weekend

By Bill Clark

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Central Missourians came face to face with the ugly role of slavery, race relations, prejudice and dehumanization last weekend — reminded by history lessons that will long be remembered by those fortunate enough to be in attendance.

The first came Friday night before a full house in Boonville's 151-year-old Thespian Hall.

The occasion? "Song of the Middle River," a play written by Thomas Pawley, a professor at Lincoln University for more than 60 years, and directed by cfrancis blackchild (Note: the small case spelling is correct.)

The second came a night later on the J.W. "Blind" Boone piano at the Walters-Boone County Historical Society museum in the form of a history lesson/piano concert by New Yorker John Davis.

The first evening ended in shame; the second evening ended much closer to fame.

"Song of the Middle River" revolves around a dehumanizing relationship between a widowed white land owner named Robert Newsom and his beautiful slave girl housekeeper, Celia, who has been forced against her will to become Newsom's concubine.

Celia bears two children by Newsom, is in love with a field hand named George and is determined to end the sexual abuse at the hands and body of her owner. When she pleads with Newsom not to touch her again, he ignores her plea. When he advances, Celia strikes him with a piece of firewood, killing him. She then burns his body.

The year — 1854. The place — a plantation 9 miles from Fulton. The story — fact, not fiction.

Celia was pregnant a third time when she killed her master. Condemned to die, she was allowed to have the baby so it could be sold with her other children. She was hanged in Fulton, the symbol of a white man's shameful disregard for his fellow man.

John Davis brought a different message — a message of measured success by two blind black musicians in a white man's world.

He reviewed the history of American music from the early 1800s that we enjoyed today in its modern form — blues, jazz, spirituals, ragtime, Dixieland — from the composer's pen and keyboard magic of Boone and his predecessor, Blind Tom Wiggins.

Wiggins, a sightless, autistic slave, was used by a white promoter/owner who used his slave's concerts to raise money for the Confederate Army's Civil War cause. His music today is show-stopping.

Davis played "The Battle of Bull Run" with crashing cannon shots, marching soldiers, charging cavalry, hymns for the dead — a musical reminder of the senselessness of war written by a man still owned by another.

Davis paid homage to Blind Tim and to the success of Boone, who was born free and used his amazing ability to transcend race. John Davis was hired because of his ability as a pianist; he proved to be an equally talented historian.

Back to "Middle River."

In addition to the history lesson taught by Celia and her fate, the performances of the nine-member cast were excellent. The play was done as a staged reading that relied on voices for the energy and emotion of the story.

Clyde Ruffin, chairman of the theater department at the University of Missouri, the chairman of the Blind Boone Home Foundation and the minister of Second Baptist Church, was in a class above.

His resonating voice served two roles — one as Josh, the old storyteller who remembered Celia and her hanging, and as George, the field hand who was in love with Celia and she with him. James Earl Jones couldn't have done it better.

Mallory Backstrom, a sophomore English major at MU, left no doubt about the conflict of love for George and being a sexual object of her owner. We will, no doubt, see much more of Mallory on stage at MU in the future.

Let's hope "Song of the Middle River" gets a full production in Columbia soon. It is too powerful a vehicle to park. It delivers a message too many need to hear today.

John Davis? Both he and Sutu Forte are graduates of The Juilliard School. What better than a duel between these two super talents on First Night — 2009?

Epilogue: On Sunday evening at Jesse Hall, Ailey II, a diverse collection of the nation's best young dancers — black, white, Latin, Asian — earned two standing ovations from a diverse crowd — black, white, Latin, Asian, men, women, young and old — for a performance for the ages.

A fitting finish for a thought-provoking, musically magic weekend.

Bill Clark's columns appear Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Reach him at 474-4510.