

# **The Impact of Socially Engaged Theatre Across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins**

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## **Abstract**

What happens when one controversial text meets another in performance? How do diverse audiences from rural and metropolitan areas respond to powerful yet provocative material? The Kennesaw State University Department of Theatre and Performance Studies sought to answer these questions with *Splittin' the Raft*, a dramatic adaptation of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as interpreted by ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the ensemble toured seven North Georgia communities, ranging from inner-city schools to rural mountain towns. The struggles faced and the conversations encountered prove the lasting legacy of American slavery. Socially engaged theatre can create a unique forum for constructive dialogue within communities. This article highlights the healing conversations inspired by this student production and explores some widely contrasting responses to renovated slave dwellings in two Georgia communities, Oxford and Sautee Nacoochee.



Figure 1. John Stewart plays Frederick Douglass/Jim. Photo by Robert Pack.

## **Introduction**

What happens when one controversial text meets another in performance? How do diverse audiences from rural and metropolitan areas respond to powerful yet provocative material? The

Department of Theatre and Performance Studies within Kennesaw State University (KSU) set out to explore just that with its Frederick Douglass/Huck Finn Arts Education Initiative. The project was called *Splittin' the Raft*. It was a dramatic adaptation of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as interpreted by ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. This ambitious production, adapted by Scott Kaiser, received an Arts Education in American Communities Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. This grant funded a tour of seven North Georgia communities, ranging from inner-city Atlanta schools to rural mountain arts centers. *Splittin' the Raft* employed "epic theatre" strategies, techniques associated with Bertolt Brecht's theatre of social commentary, to inspire a new understanding of the present through an examination of the past (Mumford, 2009). The production featured African American spirituals, songs by Stephen Foster, and original compositions for fiddle and banjo. Audiences included high school students, educators, community leaders, and people of all ages. After every performance, the company led a postshow discussion highlighting current social issues and the dramatic techniques used to create social awareness. As the project director, I taught free performance workshops to help local students explore the performance techniques featured in the production. The production website for students and educators featured historical research, a study guide, class activities, production photos, director's notes, and a documentary film about the creative process. *Splittin' the Raft* reached over 3,000 people from across the southeastern United States. What follows is an examination of our experiences in two Georgia communities, Oxford in Newton County and Sautee Nacoochee in White County.

### **Courageous Partners Wanted**

Ours was the first production of *Splittin' the Raft* to be staged in the Deep South. Months of struggling to arrange tour dates taught me why. Several of the community organizations I initially contacted signed on immediately. Over the next few months, however, most of those who had eagerly agreed to host the production withdrew, fearing the same kind of backlash Twain's novel has provoked since its initial publication in 1885. A number of school districts across the country ban *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because it uses the "N-word" well over two hundred times (Schneider, 2011). I realized, of course, that the novel was controversial. Still, I was surprised by the level of apprehension we encountered from those who claimed they agreed with what we were "trying to do" but who

feared political backlash. One school administrator put it this way: “We’re just not ready for Huck Finn.”

Despite opposition, we believed our production could be meaningful. *Splittin’ the Raft* would examine the atrocities of the past and, in the process, uncover some valuable insights about the current age. Given the volatility of the subject matter, we understood how important it would be to prepare audiences for the complex questions the production would raise. To that end, we created a project website, held postshow discussions (“talkbacks”) after every performance, and offered free performance workshops to all our host organizations. The months to come taught us a great deal about the value and challenges associated with socially engaged theatre.

### **The “Good Old Boy Network”**

My family has lived in North Georgia for several generations. My father, both of my grandfathers, and my uncles were all United Methodist ministers, which meant they frequently moved around the North Georgia area and were considered prominent members of the communities they served. In short, my family has “connections” in this part of the state.

Like many ministers’ kids, I rebelled. As a young adult, I had no intention of using family ties to further my career as a theatre artist. But now my neck was on the line. I had spent a good deal of political capital drumming up support for *Splittin’ the Raft* within the university. If the project failed, my professional credibility would suffer. As desperation set in, I began to see the “good old boy network” as my best strategy for saving face and in the process, delivering some valuable art to the communities where I was raised. Right or wrong, this is often how things get done in the South. Once I made the decision to reach out to family friends, it didn’t take long to make contact with someone willing to sign on without fretting about the play’s content or the political fallout it might cause. When one local arts organization was courageous enough to give us a chance, it made other connections a little easier, but we still weren’t out of the woods.

Over the summer, I mentioned my struggle to arrange tour dates to a friend who had played the role of Huck in Kaiser’s original workshop of the play. She suggested I contact Kathy Blandin, executive director of the Sautee Nacoochee Center (SNC), an arts center in White County, Georgia. The idea of performing in the rural mountains of Northeast Georgia was especially appealing

because of the region's reputation for racial tension. The local school bus system, for example, wasn't integrated until 1989, 35 years after the Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which dismantled segregation in the schools. As more than one White County resident put it, "The name of our county speaks for itself." For obvious reasons, I was skeptical about landing a tour date in Sautee Nacoochee.

Under Blandin's leadership, however, the SNC had recently begun a courageous initiative to build bridges between its two very separate local communities, one White and one Black. Today much of Sautee Nacoochee is still owned by the descendants of the slave-owning Williams family. Only a few miles down the road stands Bean Creek, a community largely inhabited by the descendants of slaves (C. Crittenden, *personal communication*, May 11, 2012). Coincidentally, our proposed tour dates corresponded with the opening of a newly renovated slave cabin on the Center's premises. The African American Heritage Site, as it was dubbed, was established to interpret the history of slavery in Nacoochee Valley, to heal a divided community, and to educate residents about their community's past. Bean Creek resident Lena Belle Dorsey put it this way: "If we don't keep this history alive and save what's left, our children and grandchildren will never know the history and hardship of our ancestors" (*African American Heritage Site*, 2014).

With the help of Andy Allen, another Bean Creek resident, Caroline Crittenden worked for over a decade to restore and relocate the only remaining slave cabin in Northeast Georgia. "My husband is a direct descendant of E. P. Williams, the slave owner who owned much of the land around here," said Crittenden. "Andy is a direct descendant of the slaves owned by the Williams family." When I asked what had inspired their Herculean efforts, Crittenden replied: "The black community has been deeply disappointed, disenfranchised, exploited, and betrayed. There's a long and painful history of discrimination and disappointment, some of which is relatively recent" (C. Crittenden, *personal communication*, May 11, 2012).

Kathy Blandin, who had been supportive of the project, thought our production might be a good way to celebrate the opening of the restored cabin and to initiate some constructive dialogue. (Some members of the Bean Creek community hadn't set foot in the Center for years.) Given the volatile local history, Blandin knew that every constituency had to take part in the decision to invite us. According to Andy Allen, "It takes years to build relationships of

trust, and that's what we have done here. But it only takes a minute to tear them down" (*personal communication, May 11, 2012*).

Blandin was also aware of the serious problems the production could cause if people misunderstood its intent. In the past, the Center had hosted a few well-intentioned artists whose work had actually stifled communication, causing further damage between the White and Black communities. "There is this feeling that, as an artist I am going to do this *to* you rather than *with* you," Blandin explained. "Come with me. It's a very different perspective" (*personal communication, May 11, 2012*). On the morning of August 24, Kathy e-mailed me:

Harrison,

Sorry for the delay, I met with the group yesterday afternoon and they are slightly concerned about the strong racial language even though it is historically accurate and appropriate within the context of the play. There was one more person they wanted to have read the play last night and I am waiting on word from her this morning... One way or the other I will let you know before COB today.

Thank you for your patience.

Kathy (*personal communication, August 24, 2011*)

I braced myself for another disappointment. Later I found out that Andy Allen had cast the deciding vote of support, saying: "It will be a learning experience" (*A. Allen, personal communication, May 11, 2012*). My shoulders dropped inches as I breathed a sigh of relief. At long last, our tour dates were set! The hard part was over! Now all I had to do was find the right actors and pull the production together. The easy part had begun, right?

The cast of four was balanced evenly between men and women, with two Caucasian actors and two African Americans. Annie Power, who played Huck, was the youngest. A waifish, girly sophomore with a background in musical theatre, Annie drew on her extensive dance training to believably create the comportment of an 11-year-old boy. John Stewart doubled as Frederick Douglass and the escaped slave Jim. Like me, John was the son of a preacher, an upbringing that helped him approach Douglass's lofty rhetoric. John transferred to KSU after taking time off from college when a loved one unexpectedly died. Like many who experience tragedy early in life, John possessed special empathy and insight. These qualities infused his work with a power seldom seen in young actors. In fact, in 2012, he was one of only four college actors in

the nation recognized at the Kennedy Center for his “outstanding performance” in our production of *Splittin’ the Raft*.

Rob Hadaway and Shannon Sparks played the other 28 roles. In some ways, their job was the most challenging because it required them to shift seamlessly between characters of different ages, classes, races, and even genders! Rob is a seasoned theatre performer in his early 50s who returned to college after touring with Ringling Brothers and a stint as a rodeo clown. Rob’s maturity, professionalism, and good humor would prove invaluable in the challenging months that lay ahead. Shannon, a talented and intelligent 30-something with a glorious voice, had never performed in a play. Despite her great natural gifts, there was a lot to learn. But Shannon worked tirelessly and ultimately turned in an outstanding performance.

In all honesty, the rehearsal process was the most challenging any of us had ever encountered. There was no way to explore the material without bumping into our own finely tuned prejudices. I’m proud that we supported each other through all the embarrassment, anger, and shame. We also found moments of great humor and joy. After an intensely emotional and rewarding creative process, our campus performances were a resounding success.

It’s one thing to perform controversial material within the cocoon of a campus black box theatre. People *expect* to find challenging art on a college campus. It’s quite another to invade schools and communities, where we would expose high school students and other unlikely theatregoers to socially critical work. The previous months had taught me to expect powder keg reactions.

## **Across Communities**

In every school or community we visited, at least one local issue emerged whose origins were connected to the consequences of slavery. For example, as a Georgia native, I was surprised to learn that Douglas County had originally been named for Frederick Douglass. During the Jim Crow era, however, local officials defiantly renamed the county for Stephen Douglas (one s), who had opposed Lincoln on emancipation (*Douglas County, Georgia, 2014*). After our Chattahoochee Hills performance, a local minister spoke eloquently about the Christian church’s history of alternately opposing and contributing to discriminatory practices. He reminded us that even the most virtuous human institutions are subject to human failing. We were also reminded throughout the process how individuals and communities can have very dif-

ferent responses to similar events. Our first and final community residencies in Newton County and White County vividly illustrate this disparity.



Figure 2. Kitty's cottage. Photo by Melanie Martin Long.

### **Newton County/Oxford**

*“For us in Oxford, the subject matter of the play was especially timely, as we were engaged in re-examining the myth of ‘Miss Kitty,’ a Bishop’s slave-woman over whom the Methodist Episcopal Church split in 1844.”*

- Hoyt P. Oliver, member emeritus, Oxford City Council  
 Professor emeritus of religion, Oxford College, Emory University  
*(H. Oliver, personal communication, February 9, 2012)*

Newton County, just outside metropolitan Atlanta, is only a few miles away from my hometown of Conyers, Georgia. In October 2011, the very month we arrived for our first tour performance, the community was embroiled in debate over the release of *The Accidental Slaveowner* by former Oxford College anthropology professor Mark Auslander. The book became a major topic of our postshow discussion.

On December 4, 1841, an enslaved woman known as Miss Kitty, owned by the Methodist bishop James Osgood Andrew, was offered her freedom or the option to remain Andrew’s slave “as free as the laws of the state would permit” (*Auslander, 2011, para. 2*). When Kitty chose to remain, Bishop Andrew built a small house for her where she lived in comparative freedom. Three years later, Bishop Andrew’s ownership of slaves caused a split between Northern and Southern factions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which lasted



until 1939. In the 1930s, Miss Kitty's Cottage was moved from Emory University's original campus at Oxford College to Salem Campground, a few miles away. There it remained until 1994, when the cottage was returned to Oxford (*Auslander, 2011*).

The Salem Camp Meeting at Salem Campground was founded in 1828 and is one of the oldest annual religious revivals in the United States (*Salem Camp Meeting, 2014*). As a youth, I camped at "Salem" for one week every summer, attending services twice a day and eating fried chicken in between. The tent where I slept each night was 50 yards from Miss Kitty's Cottage. I had grown up hearing the story of the benevolent bishop and his loyal slave. Time and time again, I had been reminded that Bishop Andrew was not a proponent of slavery, nor was he responsible for the divided church. I can't remember who told me the story, but it's been carved into my memory with the kind of reverence reserved only for sacred history. Even then, I sensed the story's tragic, romantic undertones. As children, we told each other tales about the ghost of Miss Kitty. Some of us even swore we had seen her pinning in the cottage window late at night.

When the cottage was returned to Oxford and restored as a small heritage museum, however, many African Americans refused to visit the site. The quaint story from my childhood about love between master and slave was under dispute by Oxford's African American residents. As Professor Auslander explains:

Many of them had heard from their elders that Miss Kitty had been the coerced mistress of Bishop Andrew and had been afforded few options of actual freedom. As one elderly African American woman rhetorically asked my class, "Why do you think Bishop Andrew built that little house for Miss Kitty just behind the big house, away from the other slaves? Just so she could be comfortable?" (*Auslander, 2011, para. 4*)

Further questions are raised by the fact that Miss Kitty was buried in the Andrew family plot, the only African American interred within the white section of the old city cemetery. In contrast to the African American supporters of the slave cabin in Sautee Nacoochee, one Oxford resident stated: "For us, this building is a place of violation, not of love" (*Auslander, 2011, para. 6*).

Having worried for some time about the show's response off campus, I was relieved when Newton County audiences filled the cavernous high school auditorium with enthusiastic applause. That



night, during the talkback, I saw people I had known for more than 30 years—friends, family members, members of the church my father had pastored a few miles away. Also present were two of my uncles, both stalwart members of the Newton County community. It was interesting to see them argue opposite sides of the controversial issue. Many in the audience felt it was important to debunk the ridiculous fairy tale of the virtuous Bishop Andrew and his loyal Miss Kitty. Why not examine history more realistically, just as scholars have examined the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings? Others viewed Auslander as an academic rabble-rouser needlessly stirring up conflict in a community he no longer inhabited in order to achieve professional notoriety. I wondered if the latter sentiment had been delivered as a subtle admonishment to me, the rebellious preacher's kid returned home.

Unsurprisingly, our passionate discussion didn't bring forth any new evidence regarding the relationship between Bishop Andrew and Miss Kitty, whose real name was Catherine Boyd (*Auslander, 2011*). It did, however, reveal the degree to which each of us can become attached to our preferred versions of history. As the discussion's moderator, I tried to remain neutral. But internally, like many who participated in the discussion, I wanted to defend the bishop. What made this story important enough to repeat generation after generation, important enough to preserve an old slave cabin as a sacred monument to the "good" slaveholder? Why was *I* so attached to the story of the benevolent master?

As someone with strong ties to the area, to United Methodism, and to Salem Campground, I felt that questioning this story called my identity into question. My birthright as a White, straight, Christian, Southern man is directly related to a narrative of entitlement. I want to believe that the traditions on which my social position rests are noble ones. Without that, my conscience cannot escape the responsibility of working for social change. This realization is not a remarkable one. I understood all of this before returning to Newton County. But for the first time, I felt *personally* implicated as the beneficiary of an unjust system.

Several people in the audience that night had a similar experience. Former Rockdale County commissioner Hank Wise responded: "Through Huck we were forced to look inward again at the role racism may still play in our relationships" (*personal communication, February 10, 2012*). Shelly Yeatman, a Newton County elementary school teacher, wrote: "This subject is too important to be swept under the rug of a 'time heals all' concept" (*personal communication, February 11, 2012*).

Another point of interest for the Newton County crowd was our depiction of the church. Most of the people who stayed for the talkback knew my father. Some were also aware that I remained active in the United Methodist Church. Yet in *Splittin' the Raft*, all the preachers are portrayed as hypocrites and purveyors of bigotry. One audience member asked actor Rob Hadaway what it was like to play the White preacher who gently explains to a slave girl: "God designed us to be His thinkers, and you to be the workers!" (*Kaiser, 2007, p. 31*).

Rob confessed how challenging the role had been for him. The difficulty stemmed from the preacher's use of the Bible to justify slavery. In order to play the role effectively, Rob had to find a way to empathize with a character whose feelings about race conflicted with his own. Rob explained: "I had to figure out a way that good people, God-fearing people, believed slavery was okay." Then he continued: "As a gay Christian . . ." (*R. Hadaway, personal communication, June 15, 2012*).

My heart stopped. Inside me something screamed: "Stop! You can't go there! I've known these people for over 30 years, trust me . . . they are *not* ready to hear this!" Fortunately, I restrained myself, took a deep breath, and slowly sat on the edge of the stage.

Rob went on to explain that what helped him empathize with the bigoted preacher was the compassion he had developed for fellow Christians who consider his sexual orientation an abomination. "In my parents' generation, people used the Bible to discredit interracial marriages," Rob said, "and they're doing the same thing with our community today" (*R. Hadaway, personal communication, June 15, 2012*).

When I looked out at the audience, I could see people, many of whom I have loved for decades, take a breath of recognition. I don't have any illusions that these folks became gay rights advocates instantaneously, but I am certain that some who were in the audience that night moved an inch closer to tolerance and understanding. Theatre can teach because it entertains. As Mary Poppins used to say: "A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down" (*Walsh, 1964*).

Months later, I asked Rob about that night. He thought for a moment, then interpreted the experience as a biblical parable, saying: "We were just planting seeds. Either they take it and grow something better, or the crows are going to eat it and take it away" (*personal communication, June 15, 2012*).



Figure 3. Re-enactor Joseph McGill performs in front of the African American Heritage Site, Sautee Nacoochee. Photo by David Greear.

### Sautee Nacoochee

*“The play made the audience think about the realities of slavery and what it meant to those who were slaves.”*

- Billy Chism, editor, *White County News*  
(personal communication, May 11, 2012)

On November 11, after a morning show at Lumpkin County High School, we loaded up the truck and drove northeast over 33 miles of winding, rural mountain roads to our final stop. The Sautee Nacoochee Center is an Appalachian cultural oasis, known for its excellent arts programming and its superior folk pottery museum. The Center is housed in a beautifully renovated “old White school” where many of the local Whites attended grade school before the days of integration. Understandably, the structure continues to evoke strong feelings from both White and Black residents. As Caroline Crittenden points out: “There are many people in Bean Creek who will not walk into that building” (personal communication, May 11, 2012).

Across the road stands a little white church (in both senses of the word), as well as a large farm still owned by a descendant of the slave-owning Williams family. A mile or so north is the bed and breakfast where our ensemble was to stay the night. The original owner of the old house was one Moses Harshaw, known as “the meanest man who ever lived” because of his brutal treatment of slaves. Locals claim his tombstone bears the inscription “Died and Gone to Hell” (*Stovall House*, 2013). The surrounding countryside is breathtakingly beautiful.

The SNC theatre is a lovely but tiny 80-seat proscenium with a performance area one eighth the size of what we were accustomed to; our set simply wouldn't fit on the stage. We had to cut some of the scenic elements and alter the staging, but by then we were used to last-minute adjustments. Despite the grueling schedule, the strenuous move from one venue to another, and the severe space limitations, there was electricity in the room. When curtain time finally arrived, the company was primed for a big event.

People poured into the theatre. With them came the kind of festival atmosphere seldom experienced at more cosmopolitan venues. I was pleased to see a wide cross-section of locals represented. Some of the old landed White families were there, along with those who had bought vacation homes in the area. There were people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. In attendance was Billy Chism, the dedicated and folksy editor of *The White County News* who had helped get the word out about the performance. Most of all, it was exciting to see members of the Bean Creek community, some of whom hadn't set foot in the building for a long time. The performance that night was among our most powerful. After the applause died down, only a few people left the room. The audience *needed* to talk.

## **Living With Santa Claus**

The vigorous postshow discussion went on for more than an hour and a half and covered the history of racial tension in the area. White and Black people, rich and poor, male and female dared to share their personal stories. The student actors were practically delirious from exhaustion, but they invested themselves in the discussion; it was clear we had the opportunity to do something good. People who wouldn't typically find themselves in the same room with one another were having a serious discussion about race, class, and gender.

At one point, a local White woman became agitated. She couldn't understand why we were going on and on about slavery, something that had happened so long ago. "Sure. Slavery was bad and all, but we fixed all that years ago, right?" Strangely, she kept using the phrase "Am I living with Santa Claus or . . ." before each of her pointed questions. For example (and I paraphrase): "*Am I living with Santa Claus* or hasn't that all been dealt with? *Am I living with Santa Claus* or are *those people* just avoiding responsibility? *Am I living with Santa Claus* or are they simply trying to live off the tax payers rather than pay their *own* way?"

The air went out of the room. We were stunned into silence. Even the eloquent Billy Chism, who had taken the woman on, was suddenly at a loss for words. I was embarrassed for the woman and for all of us. Most of all, I was ashamed that members of the Bean Creek community had to hear such insensitivity and ignorance after reaching out in good faith. How could someone hear so many graphic stories of discrimination *from her own neighbors* and still miss the fact that everything hadn't been made right? Then, when several of us were on the verge of exploding or shutting down, something changed: Bean Creek resident Sabrina Dorsey smiled at the woman. With humor and with gentleness, she spoke: "Ma'am, with all due respect... *you're living with Santa Claus*" (S. Dorsey, *personal communication*, November 11, 2011).

The room erupted with good-natured laughter and suddenly the woman began to relax and really *listen*. I'm not suggesting "Mrs. Santa Claus" underwent a full conversion that night, but just as we had experienced in Newton County, there had been a clear turning point. By the end of the conversation, she understood something about the experience of her Black neighbors that she hadn't considered before.

### **Conversations in a Slave Cabin**

The Sautee Nacoochee experience was so powerful that I returned 6 months later for a follow-up interview. Participants included Caroline Crittenden, Andy Allen, Sabrina Dorsey, Lawrence Dorsey, and Leona Dorsey. (The Dorsey family has lived in Bean Creek for five generations or more.) Also present were Todd and Kathy Blandin, who had left the SNC for a position at nearby Piedmont College; Denise Hartzell and Hill Jordan, a couple who had moved from metro Atlanta to Sautee Nacoochee; Billy Chism, editor of *The White County News*; and Candice Dyer, freelance journalist and childhood friend of Sabrina Dorsey. Candice and Sabrina were a rarity in the area because their lasting friendship had transcended racial barriers. As Chism put it: "There are really two distinct communities... There are not many people having the kind of conversation we're having right now" (B. Chism, *personal communication*, May 11, 2012).

Given the controversy in Newton County, I was eager to hear how the African American Heritage Site had been received in the community. Caroline Crittenden suggested that we actually hold our discussion inside the renovated slave cabin just a hundred yards from the building where we had performed. Soon after we all

settled in, Caroline built a fire in the fireplace, causing our shadows to dance on the rough-hewn walls. We began by discussing some of the interesting things that had gone on in the previous months.

In contrast to Miss Kitty's Cottage, the cabin in Sautee Nacoochee had become a semisacred space, set aside for important conversations. "This and the church," Andy Allen told me (*personal communication, May 11, 2012*). As a preacher's son and theatre actor, I knew precisely what she meant. We go to church or enter the theatre in order to have heightened experiences. Such rituals give us permission to examine life more deeply than we might in other locations. In these sacred spaces, there is an increased responsibility to tell the truth and *hear* the truth.

The weekend before my return, they had invited Joe McGill to bring his "Slave Dwelling Project" to the site. McGill, a program officer of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and a descendant of slaves, sleeps in slave dwellings across the country promoting the preservation of these important historical structures. "We have preserved the mansions, but there has been very little attention paid to the people who lived in the little houses—their sweat and toil made the big houses possible" (*Chism, 2012, p. C1*).

Dressed as members of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, an all-Black Union army regiment formed during the Civil War, McGill and storyteller James Brown recounted the battle of Morris Island for 130 locals gathered on the lawn of the newly renovated dwelling. Bean Creek residents Lawrence Dorsey and Stacey Allen took an active part in the event, donning slave clothing and spending the night in the cabin. The reenactors applauded community members for their restoration efforts: "If the place is not there, you can easily deny the history," McGill said. "And a place is a lot better than a sign that reads: 'Here once stood...'" (*Chism, 2012, p. C1*). It was thrilling to realize how many important conversations the cabin had already made possible.

Then I asked them to recall our discussion with "Mrs. Santa Claus":

Caroline Crittenden: I recall Billy rising to his feet, literally jumping from his seat! I thought he was going to accost the poor woman.

Billy Chism: I wasn't offended as much as I was astounded by it.... There's nothing more powerful than seeing an actor under lights. And seeing that gal on the

auction block, you can see it on television or watch a movie but it's not the same as seeing it live. You can almost reach out and touch these people. And then to have someone say: "it wasn't so bad."

Candice Dyer: I heard someone say that in the beauty shop two days ago. (*B. Chism and C. Dyer, personal communication, May 11, 2012*)

I asked Sabrina Dorsey what she had been thinking during the "Mrs. Santa Claus" debate:

I think everybody was going around the issue. Nobody wanted to tell her, "Wake up! They were selling 13-year-old kids away from their mamma and daddy! Wake up! They were beating the breath out of a living being. Wake up! ... To her it wasn't real. But to us it is very real. Thank God times have changed and we don't have to go through that same kind of racism. It's a different kind of racism. (*S. Dorsey, personal communication, May 11, 2012*)

We began discussing the different "versions" of history each of us had been taught:

We were taught the Civil War ad nauseam. It was instilled that we White southerners were the victims of tyranny... My first week of college my political science professor showed us the footage from Alabama with the fire hoses and the dogs. And I cried for hours. And I thought: If I don't know something as important as this, what *else* don't I know? (*C. Dyer, personal communication, May 11, 2012*)

I was aware that several of the people with whom I was talking had been a part of the decision to invite us to perform. Over the past months, I had often wondered how those conversations had unfolded. It took far more courage for the SNC to welcome us than one of the more timorous suburban venues. Why did they do it? Denise Hartzell, who ultimately became an enthusiastic supporter of the production, had initially been concerned about the reactions the play might provoke.



Denise Hartzell: I was worried that it was going to offend people. I was definitely apprehensive about the language used in the play. I was more concerned about the play's use of the infamous "N-word"... more than anything else. My experiences in DeKalb and Gwinnett counties, teaching primarily minority students, left me hypersensitive to their reactions. Happily, Kathy was right, and I was wrong. The scene with the auction was one of the most worrisome pieces.

Billy Chism: Who were you afraid of offending? Why would it offend White people, except for the fact that we did it? (*B. Chism and D. Hartzell, personal communication, May 11, 2012*)

That moment, something occurred to me. The decision to block us from performing had always been made by *White* people. Usually, the implied rationale had been to avoid offending African Americans. Like Denise Hartzell, I worried about this myself. But Chism's question helped me to understand why we White folks are so uncomfortable at times: We are afraid to examine what our own people have done. Sometimes we hide this fear behind our attempts to "protect" African Americans. Although contemporary people don't often admit it, we are threatened as easily by the writings of Frederick Douglass as we are by those of Mark Twain. If we truthfully examine where we've come from, we can't avoid looking at the truth of where we are today. And if we do that, there's no way to avoid seeing our responsibility for the future.

Sabrina Dorsey: I know some [African American] people. Racism hurts them so bad they think this cabin is a really bad thing. We get into arguments. I have to explain that this isn't so much about the cabin. We want people to understand that we are all equal and to remind them that this really happened. We want people to wake up. We're just human beings. We're all the same.

Author: Is it good to tell the truth, even when it's ugly?

Sabrina: I think it's good. I think it's really good. Our children, some of them now think everything is okay. And it's not. [They think] everything is going to be all

right. Everything is eventually just going to work itself out. Some things in life... we've got to face them. We've got to make them be all right. It doesn't just work out on its own. We have to make it. We have to face it. (S. Dorsey, *personal communication, May 11, 2012*)

On May 21, 2012, only 10 days after our conversation in the slave cabin, one of the local chapters of the Ku Klux Klan made national news by applying to adopt a highway only a few miles away in neighboring Union County (*Abbey & Castillo, 2012*).



Figure 4. The full company of *Splittin' the Raft* conducts a post-show discussion. From left to right: Shannon Sparks, John Stewart, Rob Hadaway, Annie Power. Photo by Raven DeGarmo.

## Lessons Learned and Lessons Remembered

*Splittin' the Raft* provided many practical examples of the theories we often discuss in the rehearsal hall or in our university classrooms. For the first time, most of the student company members *experienced* theatre as an effective tool for social change. Rarely do artists witness such positive, tangible, and immediate results from their work. But our discoveries weren't merely artistic. Each of us emerged with a deeper understanding of the roles we play on the academic stage and in the larger communities we inhabit.

Socially engaged theatre creates a unique forum for constructive dialogue across communities between students and teachers, between performers and audiences. Wherever we went, *Splittin' the Raft* prompted productive discussions about race, gender, economic equity, theatre, literature, music, and the social circumstances that inspire socially-engaged works. To my knowledge, none of our host organizations received negative feedback after we performed. On the contrary, we received a flood of positive comments from students, educators, community leaders, theatre professionals, and residents of the communities we visited. But our experiment in

creative public engagement required a great deal of courage from everyone involved.

Sometimes in order to overcome our prejudices, we have to let the ugly stuff come out into the open. We have to acknowledge what we *really* think and feel. Before that can happen, we have to be relaxed enough and *trust* enough to let down our defenses. Only then can we risk being influenced by “others.” That’s what theatre *can* do but often *doesn’t* do.

As Berthold Brecht came to realize, we must entertain *before* we teach. When audiences engage in the act of play, they are free to examine social issues on a more objective level. But play also helps us experience on a more *human* level. That’s when we can apply what we observe on the stage to our own social contexts.

At first, my having used personal connections as a way into these communities felt like an unfair advantage. But later I realized it was precisely my status as an insider that opened the door to constructive social commentary. The fact that these were “my people” meant that whatever social problems we uncovered were also my own. Audiences relaxed when they understood we were not there to judge them any more than we were there to judge ourselves. From the very beginning, this project was an exercise in self-inquiry. Audiences influenced our thoughts about the work as much as (or possibly more than) we influenced theirs. Ensemble members provided incredible support to one another, making it possible to confront our own contributions to the web of social injustice.

Finally, these experiences remind us about the importance of place. Critical public discourse often requires physical delineation. Crossing the threshold of a church, a theatre, a courthouse, or a renovated slave cabin prepares us for a heightened experience, the kind of experience we can’t receive in the ordinary places of life, the kind of experience necessary to bring about incremental social change. Questioning our views about the past is a difficult, often painful process, but an essential one. It isn’t enough to know the facts. Sometimes it becomes necessary to construct physical reminders that help us *reexperience* them. The slave cabins in Oxford and Sautee Nacoochee elicited widely different responses, but both have inspired important public discussions.

Frederick Douglass’s words are no less inspiring today than they were over a hundred years ago. Likewise, Twain’s masterpiece is more than well-crafted literature; it is an entertaining reflection of the American conscience. *Huck Finn* is provocative because it

reminds us where we have fallen short of the American promise of freedom. “Liberty and justice for all” is not something we achieved long ago. It is a *living* principle and must be nurtured like any living organism. Therefore it is necessary, and occasionally uncomfortable, to examine our actions in light of all we claim to believe. Thankfully, our greatest artists and orators make it possible, even entertaining, to remember who we are.

Note. The author has received express written permission to use all quotes. This study was IRB approved.

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