

Bless This Bless This Bless This House House House

Author Silas House's play
from Page to Stage
By Kim Thomas

"I'm a long time travelling here below
I'm a long time travelling away from home
I'm a long time travelling here below
To lay this body down"
—Traditional folk hymn

Kentucky Writers Day is April 24 (this year, Gurney Norman will be inducted as Poet Laureate) — so it's an especially appropriate opening night for Actors Guild of Lexington to premiere *Long Time Travelling*, a play, written by celebrated Kentucky author Silas House (this is the spelling the author prefers). It's been in the works over a year and its opening offers the chance for Lexington audiences to witness the homegrown fruition of delicate and exacting toil.

Kentucky native Silas House is a music journalist, environmental activist, and columnist, but he is best known for his novels and his fiction is known for its attention to the natural world, working class characters, and the plight of the rural place and rural people. (His next novel, *Eli the Good*, is due out this fall.)

Kentucky's award-winning gifted folk hero (Appalachian Writer of the Year, Appalachian Book of the Year, Special Achievement Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, the Chaffin Prize for Literature, two-time recipient of the Kentucky Novel of the Year and two-time finalist for the

Southern Book Critics Circle Prize), House gives voice to the conflict we all feel when stretched beyond our limits.

In this case, it is the loss of the family patriarch that pits husband against wife, sister against brother, mother against daughter, father against child.

"I don't think this is an Appalachian play although I'm known for setting my writing in Appalachia. Instead, it's very firmly a rural play, about rural people, whose lives are just as complicated and interesting and dramatic as anyone else's. More so, if you ask me."

—author/playwright, Silas House

Each of the characters takes turns bringing the others to their senses, while at times losing their own sense of normalcy and letting go of the grip the patriarch had on their lives. House's masterful script leads the audience convincingly down a path to resignation and renewal, using the hymn, "Long Time Travelling" as a central theme.

Rick St. Peter, Artistic Director of Actors Guild and House joined forces a little over a year ago with House committing to writing the work and Actors Guild agreeing to bring the play to the Downtown Arts Center. "Why not come to see a play by someone who is from this area, who has put so much heart and soul into his work? It's not often you have the opportunity to enjoy the work of a world-class author like Silas, who is willing to take himself out of his comfort zone [of writing novels]."

The song that inspired

Silas House's choice of the hymn, "Long Time Travelling" is intriguing. I searched all 12 of my hymnals and couldn't find it. So I asked House, why that song in this context? He replied, "This song has been around in the mountains at least since the early 1900s but I first heard it performed by the great contemporary group, The Wailin' Jennys. Their cover of it is pretty amazing, with the most beautiful vocals you've ever heard, but it was the words that drew me in. When they sing 'I'm a long time travelling here below / I'm a long time travelling away from home,' it's so melancholy and hopeful, and those are two things that this play is, too. I think it's a song about the troubles of life and the hope for something better to come along eventually. That's what these characters are hoping for. I'm interested in the darkness of life — God knows I've lived through that, like anyone else — but I'm even more interested in the light, and how we're all just trying our best to be good people and keep traveling on. The characters sing some of the song in the play and that's probably my favorite moment in the play, these two voices coming together into one, brought together by music."

This is not House's only venture into the world of theatre. He says, "My first play, *The Hurting Part*, was staged by the University of Kentucky in December 2005 and we had a really successful run. The literary and acting editions of the play were published last year.

"It took me more than a year to write this play, and it was originally called *The Cool of the Day*, because it started out being based on a short story of mine by that name but over the course of the writing that title no longer applied. I

started out this play thinking I knew what it was going to be about but then it just took on a life of its own and the characters sort of rose up and did their own thing. And it veered so far away from the genesis that a title change was necessary. It became a play about the journey we take through life,

the journey toward understanding ourselves and others better, so it required a title that dealt with travel or movement in some way. So, *Long Time Travelling* was the perfect title.

The subject matter — change, transition and acceptance



Photo by Curt Richter

— resonates today. “I think we’re a country that has experienced enormous change over the last decade. The world is such a different place since 2001. I wrote this play during the presidential campaign, so the idea of change was just palpable, everywhere you went. I was struggling with the play, trying to figure out what it was about, and then, one night, I took my daughters to a campaign rally for Obama. It was so moving to see all the people in the audience who were just absolutely desperate for change. They were full of hope, too. So it was this amazing thing, to feel that; and suddenly, I knew that was the main theme of the play. It’s something people don’t talk about much. Not even in art. Once I tackled that theme, I saw why ... because it’s such a hard thing to articulate, the ideas of change and transition. It’s a theme that’s especially hard to do in a 90-minute play and might be better accustomed to a long form like a novel. But it was the theme that presented itself and I believe that the best writing only comes from the author challenging him or herself. And so the play was born.”

Proving that he practices what he preaches, House also placed his trust in people he knew would provide truthful feedback so he could make appropriate changes, and he is grateful to them.

“I have a small circle of friends whom I trust as readers. They’re all ruthlessly honest, and I’m indebted to them for that. I would write scenes of the play then have read-throughs with those friends. Rick St. Peter, the director of the play, has been incredibly patient with me and given me so much artistic freedom with the play. When he approached me about doing a play for them, he allowed me a blank slate, which is the most important thing you can give to a writer. Everyone at AGL has been incredibly supportive and focused on making the best piece of art we can make.”

When asked if he had any advice for other aspiring writers, House suggested, “Be determined and go to plenty of workshops. And read *everything*.”

He adds, “One more thing: I have been hugely influenced by playwrights like Horton Foote and William Inge, both of whom usually focused on rural people. I don’t think this is an Appalachian play although I’m known for setting my writing in Appalachia. Instead, it’s very firmly a rural play, about rural people, whose lives are just as complicated and interesting and dramatic as anyone else’s. More so, if you ask me.”

As Artistic Director for Actors Guild, St. Peter was eager to open the doors to the rehearsal process to reveal how the play went from “page to stage.” This process went through its own series of changes as he and his cast breathed life into the words that House created. He admits that his favorite moments directing a play are derived from the very first run-through, the first ‘stumble-through,’ and the tech run.

Sunday night, at the tech run, St. Peter spoke of how this stage is bittersweet, “When, as a director the time has come for me to hand over the reins of the work over to the actors, who then make it their own. After living with the notion of doing a Silas House play for over a year, thinking about the production of the play for the last six months, and living and breathing it for the past four weeks, my role as director now changes, and I have to give it up. So it’s a time of melancholy for me, I get sad; it’s almost like a post-partum depression.”

He credits to the ability of our community to embrace such great hometown talents as being key in making *Long Time Travelling* provide confidence in such an endeavor. “This



(Left to right) Missy Johnston, Alyssa Graves, and Tim X. Davis.

is what makes Lexington great, though, is that Lexington supports its local artists. In New York, Silas would not have had this experience. He placed a lot of trust in us, and I’m very proud of that.”

During the read-through, the rehearsal process and the tech run, I noticed that although he allowed the actors to interpret their own roles, St. Peter was constantly concerned about the perception of the audience in regard to the strength of the character, often stopping the reading to correct a weak stance, have the actors stand diagonally versus sideways, or have a word or passage rephrased with a different emphasis. It became clear that, although a play is made up of words, it is the action and the blocking that also make the text come alive, and the performance is oftentimes as much about carefully planned choreography as it is about speaking.

Long Time Travelling, by Silas House

Childhood sweethearts Adam and Lora married shortly after high school and set up housekeeping in the rural town where their family has always lived. They’ve loved one another for as long as they can remember, but they’re not quite sure when they were in love, a fact that becomes even clearer once Adam realizes that he might actually be a poet instead of a mechanic. Lora can’t seem to get over the death of her father, secretly pines for a lost love, and butts heads with no one more than her husband, except, perhaps, her mother, Chatty, who has been living with them since her husband’s death six months ago. Chatty has always been a devout member of the local Holiness church but suddenly she finds herself not believing in much of anything anymore. There’s also Lora’s brother, Mason, who believes if someone doesn’t think the way he does they must be wrong. And his strange, sweet daughter, Diva, who hates her father about as much as she hates her name.

The boiling tensions come to a head on the birthday of Lora’s late father, General, when everyone must make a decision about whom they really are, stop living in the past, and decide to embrace the present — and the future. This is a play about the struggles of being different, being an artist, being someone who decides to change their mind in a place (and

time) where the acceptable thing to do is to find one way of thinking and remain in it for good. Most of all, it’s about the complexities of loving each other for who we are, even if that means letting someone go.

Cast and Crew

Long Time Travelling is the fifth world premiere St. Peter has directed. He says, “I did one at Mill Mountain Theatre in Virginia in 2004, I directed *Weak/Side/Help* at UK last year (starring Jeremy Jarmon from the UK football team). In my first season at AGL, I directed a play called *Checking In* by Brian Hampton, which I will be directing again this summer in New York at the Midtown International Theatre Festival. I love directing new plays; there is something special and exciting about being there for the creation of a new piece.”

St. Peter explains why he selected this author, this play, saying “I was introduced to Silas House about two years ago, and we hit it off well. He had an idea for a play and I told him if he wrote it, we would produce it. He is a remarkable writer and an even more remarkable human being. So I encouraged him to follow his inspiration and we would have a go at it. About a year ago, I scheduled it for this season and he has been working on it off and on since then.”

“Part of the process in developing a new play revolves around the audience. Theatre doesn’t happen in a vacuum, it requires an audience as the final ingredient in the process. Here is the opportunity for AGL audiences to see a new work by one of Kentucky’s premiere living writers ... it is a unique opportunity that doesn’t happen too often. If they are fans of Silas’ work as a novelist, they can also see how different a medium writing for the theatre is and how much the actors bring to the realization of a playwrights work.”

Missy Johnston (Chatty)

Missy Johnston is a Lexington stage vet so it’s no surprise that this is not her first venture into a world premiere of a play. “Definitely not my first time. I went to graduate school at The Dallas Theater Center, where new scripts were

developed and presented all the time for Playmarket, an annual event very much like Actors Theatre's Humana Festival. I worked on lots of new scripts there, in many capacities, including as a playwright. My original musical, *Blood Money*, was produced there for Playmarket 1979. Seems like eons ago!"

She thinks the fact that it's new is both liberating as binding. "It is both. We're free to create the world of the play

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—Actors Guild artistic director Rick St. Peter

completely from scratch. At the same time, we have no precedents from which to draw ideas or inspiration. Our only guide is the script itself, plus the input of the playwright when he can be at rehearsal."

Johnson explains that role of Chatty appealed to her because "She's age-appropriate for me, which is wonderful at 56. Strong roles for women my age are rare. Chatty's been through some tough times, but she has come out of a long marriage to a controlling man with a determination to live her own life, on her own terms, and to find her own salvation. She's still learning. And her language is wonderful!"

Johnston believes that the input of audience members is very important to the continuing development of the script, and is "happy that we're giving Silas that initial production, so that he can evaluate what happens when the play is a living, breathing thing, rather than just words on paper. We're definitely going to give it our best effort so that he can decide where to take it from here."

Johnston will again be a presence at this year's SummerFest, "I'm costuming *Henry IV, Part One*, for SummerFest, but that's not official yet. And I have a busy summer ahead with (musical group) The Bats."

Tim Davis (Mason) Tim Davis was a member of the original cast of Laddy Sartin's *Catfish Moon*, at Southern Mississippi and Mike Friedman's *Daniel Boone: The Man and the Legend at Ft. Harrod* (along with fellow cast mate Josiah Correll). Davis has produced and directed two of his own shows (most recently BCTC's fall production of *Dancing With Dani*, see *Ace Weekly*, November 2008). Davis considers working on an original piece neither liberating nor a hindrance, because "I always approach a role from my perspective and try to put my own spin on it, whether it's a new play or an established piece. About his role as Mason, Davis explains, "He is Diva / Willa's Father and he is the prime impediment to her being able to develop into her own person. He tries to dictate who she is and will be, based on his rigid, old ideals (Mason+stone?). While he is misguided, this does come from a place of love, as he only wants what's best for his daughter — he just doesn't know what this is. His resentment for his family runs deep, as ironically, his Father did him the same way he is doing his child."

Josiah Correll plays Adam opposite Hayley Williams' Lora. The two have a natural on-stage chemistry, partly due to the fact that they are longtime friends, and have acted together before, but both bring their own distinctive interpretation to their roles as a married couple who are going through a time of transition, as Adam struggles to understand Lora's refusal to move on after the death of her domineering father.

Correll spent the last two years "working at the B Street Theatre in Sacramento CA, which is a new works theatre. I did three premieres at B St, and I also did two premieres at UK. One of the new works I did at UK was Silas' first play *The Hurting Part*."

"I love being the first to take a crack at a role and to add my own personal spin to it. When you originate a role there is more of a sense of ownership that goes along with

also named Josiah, so Tim gave me the name Big Country to avoid any confusion (I think the name originated with Bryant Reeves, the basketball player)."

Correll adds, "I think it's essential to have a dynamic where you feel free to joke and jeer one another. When everyone feels comfortable with one another, it's easier to dive head-first into the creative process. Not to mention, when you're working with such serious material it helps to blow

it, but along with that comes the pressure of having the playwright watching you take his role and make it yours.



(Left to right) Alyssa Graves, Missy Johnston, and Tim X. Davis.

It's nerve wracking having the playwright in the audience but at some point in the process you have to loosen up and just make a few mistakes."

Correll feels like Adam's role is to initiate the action of the play, or at least part of it. "He's gotten to a point in his life where he can't accept things the way they are (specifically being married to someone who won't accept the change that is occurring in his life). So he essentially provides an ultimatum: accept me for who I am or I'm leaving. In a play about change, Adam is pressing Laura to take the first step toward change with or without him."

Correll and Williams have only done one other show together (*Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, at UK), but they have been friends since college. "I think it only makes it easier to be working with such a close friend. Because we have spent so much time together, our relationship on stage just comes naturally." Correll takes quite a bit of good-natured but edgy ribbing from St. Peter, as well as from Davis, who calls him "Big Country." Correll explains "My first professional job as an actor was at Fort Harrod doing *Daniel Boone the Man and the Legend*, I was 17. Tim was also acting in the show and he quickly became a mentor of mine. The stage manager was

off a little steam now and then."

Diva is played by newcomer **Alyssa Graves**. St. Peter says, "What Alyssa has, you cannot teach. She is a real find for this production." She's from Indiana, but came to Asbury College to study theatre.

Hayley Williams, who plays Lora, says, "The first new play I was in was *A Noise in the Room* written by Lauren Argo when I was working on my undergrad in Theatre at UK. I like to think that my prior experience working with a new play only helps me with this one. I am already used to adjusting to script revisions and working with the playwright — Silas was really good about asking the cast for opinions on what worked and what didn't and adjusting the script accordingly."

Explaining how her character contributes to the message of the play, Williams says, "Lora is the young wife who is not ready to change. She wants to live in the past or present. She is not looking to make a change in her life. She is happy with the world as it is, at least she thinks so. Lora has lost who she is and her journey in the play is to find that again. The message of the play is change. Lora is the model of being afraid to change. She shows what not changing and refusing to accept others changing can do to a person. Lora is afraid of the unknown."

Williams says. "I think all of us have had to deal with issue such as loss and change and fear of the unknown at different points in our lives. This play really shows the audience the way families deal with change and each other."

We have just been through a series of glorious rainy days here in the Bluegrass. They are glorious, because we need rain. It's a part of life, and it's representative of cleansing out the old, settled dust and as a result, bringing new growth to what seems like settled ground.

With the opening of the play this weekend, it's exciting to watch the anticipation build as ideas come to fruition within a team of artists, and this offering by mountaintop removal activist/NPR contributor, New York Times bestseller Silas House *especially* makes a Kentucky girl proud to be a local writer, to hail from the Bluegrass, to be a daughter of a coal miner's daughter from Kentucky. ■

Premiere is Friday, April 24, 2009 at 7:30pm, Actors Guild of Lexington at the Downtown Arts Center.