

The Haunting Of Jim Crow Explores Segregation, Paradox And Life Of Strom Thurmond And His Mixed Race Daughter

Play to be presented Feb. 17-20 in Sherwood Hall, MCASD

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"Contradiction beyond description" is how playwright Allan Havis capsules the paradoxical life of the late Sen. Strom Thurmond, an avowed and militant segregationist who fathered a daughter out of wedlock with a 16-year-old black maid who worked at his family's home. Can these two extremes ever be reconciled, Havis asks.

Havis's newly expanded play, *The Haunting of Jim Crow*, marks the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court Decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional, and it personalizes the racial issues confronted with focus on the relationship between segregationist Thurmond and his mixed race daughter, Essie Mae Washington Williams.

The Haunting of Jim Crow will be presented Feb. 17-20 in Sherwood Hall at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. It is being presented by Thurgood Marshall College at the University of California, San Diego, and was commissioned by Marshall College Provost Cecil Lytle. General admission is \$20; students, military, and seniors, \$15. Because of the educational nature of the play, special group rates are offered to high school students, as well as selected performances and interaction or "talk back" with key artistic personnel. Study guides available (pdf) for teachers prior to the performance.

The Haunting of Jim Crow is set in the 1950s during the Eisenhower years and ends in our time. The drama addresses the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954 and the Supreme Court's far reaching impact the following years as seen in context to the lives of Thurgood Marshall, Earl Warren, Strom Thurmond and his mixed race daughter, Essie Mae.

"*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* is widely regarded by historians and legal scholars as the most important Supreme Court decision of the past century," says Michael Schudson, UCSD professor of communication and director of the Thurgood Marshall Institute. "It found all laws requiring racial segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional." Thurgood Marshall, then director of the NAACP Legal and Education Defense Fund, successfully argued the case before the Supreme Court. "Jim Crow was the general term for the regulations in the South that enforced racially segregated" public places, Schudson adds.

Staunch segregationist Strom Thurmond championed segregation and opposed every step toward integration. "He spearheaded the Southern Manifesto, a major onslaught by most of the southern senators and congress members in 1957," says Havis, also co-chair of MFA playwriting at UCSD. "The Manifesto was basically a 'firewall' to prevent any further actions into southern schools and public institutions with respect to integration."

Throughout his public and political life, Thurmond was a Southern politician whose policies supported white supremacy. He married twice - young, attractive, white women. His first wife, Jean, died before reaching 40, and he was 66 when he wed his second wife, Nancy, 22, with whom he had children. Yet in his secret world, that as the father of a mixed race daughter, he was a softened and an empathic Southern gentleman.

Thurmond financed Essie Mae's college education and helped her financially over the years to raise her children after her husband died. She first met Thurmond when she was 16 and visited him with her mother, Carrie, in his law offices. He visited her in college when he was governor of South Carolina. In later years she had sessions with him in his Senate office. During these visits - as depicted in the play - Thurmond did display genuine tenderness, complimented Essie Mae on her appearance, encouraged her in education and fitness, and told her about the extraordinary bond he had felt with her mother even though they did not have much in common. (Carrie died in 1948 at age 38 in a "poverty ward" and she and Thurmond had not continued a relationship. Essie Mae had been raised by Carrie's sister and brother-in-law.) Thurmond said he considered Essie Mae part of the family, and that colored people are loved by God, should love God, and that they contribute to society. Still, Thurmond did not include Essie Mae in the family will.

Thurmond's feelings for Essie Mae aside, for the outwardly gracious Southern gentlemen, black people, as a race, were a different society and a different class from whites, and segregation laws were needed to protect the purity of the races.

"It's not that Strom Thurmond ever swore me to secrecy," Essie Mae writes in her new book, *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* (ReganBooks, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, Jan. 27, 2005) "He never swore me to anything. He trusted me, and I respected him, and we loved each other in our deeply repressed ways, and that was our social contract." Essie Mae did not come forward about their relationship until after Thurmond's death in 2003.

According to play director Delicia Turner Sonnenberg, *The Haunting of Jim Crow* "takes a complex racial issue (segregation) and makes it urgent and intimate in the context of Strom Thurmond and Essie Mae."

The plays narrator notes that Essie Mae represents the "talented unacknowledged daughter of all Southern white men" during those years.

As for the haunting, Schudson suggests that Thurmond is haunted by his past; Essie Mae is haunted by her secret, and "we're all haunted by what *Brown v. Board of Education* failed to achieve in racial harmony and justice, regardless of its successes."

Havis adds that the play's title "comes from the notion that Jim Crow laws and codes have managed to resurface 50 years later 'from the grave' despite federal court action to stem segregation in our schools, and by extension, in public places." Havis says the economy is one reason national statistics on integration have slipped. "Since we don't have school busing these days, a wealthy family can find a neighborhood that is exclusive and a school system that is very white. Inner schools are becoming more and more non-white.

"The secondary meaning of the title concerns the posthumous publicity which has surrounded Strom Thurmond's first child - the haunting of Sen. Thurmond within a light very different from his 80 years of public service."

"Was there a time when he wanted to go public?" Havis muses. "Out of guilt? Religion? If he had told the public, would he have been effective as a Southern senator?"

The Haunting of Jim Crow elicits questions, answers, and more questions.

Havis has had his work produced at theatres across the United States and in Europe. He has received numerous awards, as well as commissions, including those from England's Chichester Festival, Sundance, Ted Danson's Anasazi, South Coast Rep, San Diego Rep, Mixed Blood Theatre, and Malashock Dance. He is the author of 11 published plays and the editor of *American Political Plays* (University of Illinois) and *Albert The Astronomer* (Harper/Collins).

Sonnenberg is an award-winning director (recently picking up two more awards at the 2005 KPBS Patté Awards) and a founding member and director of artistic programming for MOXIE Theatre. Her directing credits include *Kimberly Akimbo* (Moxie Theatre, 6th @ Penn, and the Lyceum), *Fit to be Tied* (Diversionary Theatre), *Othello* (Women's REP), and Euripides' *Children of Heracles* adapted by Marianne MacDonald (6th @ Penn).

The cast is comprised of experience professionals active in San Diego theatrical productions.

Tickets for *The Haunting of Jim Crow* may be purchased from the Price Center Box Office, (858) 534-8497. Performance dates and times are: Feb. 17, 11 a.m. and 8 p.m. Feb. 18, 8 p.m. Feb. 19, 8 p.m. Feb. 20, 2 and 7 p.m.

For further information and for group discounts for high school students and special programs for them, contact Lance Rogers, (858) 534-4003. Group rates are \$12.50 per student for 10 students or more; \$10 per student for 20 students or more.

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