

Story of infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment told in 'Miss Evers' Boys'

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

"There are no overnight successes."
Those are words that Yetta Young lives by. And she should know.

Young has been coming to Winston-Salem for the National Black Theatre Festival since 1995. She sat in audiences at countless plays, took notes and dreamed.



Photo courtesy of Yetta Young Productions

Actors in a "Miss Evers' Boys" scene.

"I knew that one day I wasn't going to be just an attendee. I knew I would have my name on the marquee," Young said recently by phone from her home in Los Angeles.

As director and producer of "Miss Evers' Boys" — one of this year's NBTF plays generating a great deal of buzz — Young is fulfilling her prophecy.

Written by David Feldshuh, "Miss Evers' Boys" is based on the infamous Tuskegee Experiment, a government study in the 1930s and 1940s that involved withholding needed treatment for black men in Alabama afflicted with syphilis. Although the play is a fictionalized account of events that took place as part of the experiment, it is deeply rooted in fact. The lead character, Eunice Evers, is based on Eunice Rivers, the African-American nurse who worked under the two doctors that administered the experiment.

Young said she was drawn to the play by its historical roots.

"I was just amazed. I was not really aware about all of this history," she said.

Young was commissioned to direct the play after winning over audiences and critics for her direction and production of an African-American version of "The Vagina Monologues" featuring celebrities such as Mo'Nique and Vanessa Bell Calloway. The production raised nearly \$10,000 for Los Angeles women's shelters. Her YettaYoung Productions also has brought to the stage the Keith Antar Mason play "For Black Boys Who Have Considered Homicide When the Streets Were Too Much" and Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf," which was staged in Washington, D.C.

Young, a Fisk University graduate, "stepped out on faith" and into the cut-throat world of entertainment after she was down-



Pelham



Houston



Roquemore



Philip



Brown



Coleman



Conrad



Young

sized from her Washington, D.C., social service job in 1998.

As a West Coast theater director, Young has had much success (and a slew of NAACP Theatre Award nominations), considering that Hol-

"I was really interested in getting into a role that I could study," Coleman said. She spent time researching Eunice Rivers and wound up having great respect for the nurse. Over the decades, however, some have questioned the role of Nurse Rivers, because at some point she did discover what the government was doing but held her tongue. Coleman said her character is caught between a rock and a hard place.

"I feel she is a victim as well. She was following her oath as a nurse by following the doctors' instructions," Coleman said.

The various dimensions of the character have given Coleman fodder as an actress.

"It has challenged me to go places I have never explored before," said Coleman, who has starred in close to a dozen stage productions and played the lead role in the Showtime short film "Rain."

This will be Coleman's first time at the NBTF. She has been a longtime fan of the festival and is excited about the possibility of seeing other festival plays. Coleman hopes people are just as excited about "Miss Evers' Boys." She bills it as both entertaining and educational, heart-wrenching and historical.

"I think we need to see things like this so we can see what has happened in our history, because if we don't know our history, we will make the same mistakes," Coleman said.

Young said the play is not all about tragedy and despair. There are elements of humor, dancing (the lead male character is an aspiring professional dancer) and love. Young also said that people who have seen the HBO movie based on the play will get a new perspective from the stage.

"Because we are doing it on stage, we are forced to be more creative, so if you have seen the movie, you will get something different," Young said.

Venue: Arts Council Theatre

Schedule:
Aug. 5 at 8 p.m.; Aug. 6 and
Aug. 7 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Ticket Price:

\$35

lywood is a world away from the traditions of the Great White Way.

"L.A. is not really a theater town," Young said. "A lot of people out here want to be on television or in films."

Young held extensive auditions for the seven actors — Alexander Pelham, Vincent Conrad, Averil Houston, Gilbert Glenn Brown, Bryan Roquemore, Darrell Philip and Shonnese C.L. Coleman — who make up the cast of "Miss Evers' Boys." She said the cast is a rare find in Tinseltown, where everyone has stars or dollar signs in his eyes.

"They are hard working. They are hungry, and that is exciting. They are not jaded in any way by this business."

Shonnese C.L. Coleman plays the title role in the play. The role is a dream come true for the actress who cut her teeth on the stages of New York playing memorable characters such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

Downtown Dining

South by Southwest

241 S. Marshall Street

Phone: 727-0800

Hours: Tu.-Sat. 5:30-

10:30 p.m.

Features Southwestern cooking.

Bistro 420

420 W. 4th Street

Phone: 721-1336

Hours: M-F 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

lunch; W-Sat. 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m.

dinner

Features gourmet cooking, weekly and daily specials, live music evenings.

Camel City Cafe'

878 W. 4th Street

Phone: 734.1797

Hours: M-Sat.

5 p.m. - 11 p.m.

Features eclectic, fresh, innovative menu

Dill Pickle Sandwich Shop

209 W. 4th Street

Phone: 723-5192

Hours: M-Sat. 7 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Features eat-in/take-out breakfast, lunch.

Cat's Corner Cafe

411 W. 4th Street

Phone: 722-9911

Hours: M-F 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Th.-Sat. 5 p.m. - 10 p.m.
Features deli sandwiches, soups and salads/dinner entrées.

Henry F. Shaffner House

Bed and Breakfast and Restaurant

150 S. Marshall Street

Phone: 777-0052

Hours: Tu.-Sun. 5 p.m. - 9 p.m.

Sunday brunch

11 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Features continental cuisine.

Kabob's Indian Bar & Grill

321 W. 4th Street

Phone: 725-6778

Hours: M-F 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.

Sat. 5 p.m. - 10:30 p.m.

High Tea: 3-4 p.m., M-F

Sunday Brunch 11 a.m. - 2

p.m.

Features North Indian and

South Indian chefs

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Listing information from the Downtown Winston-Salem Partnership. For more information on downtown projects and events, log onto www.dbsp.org.