

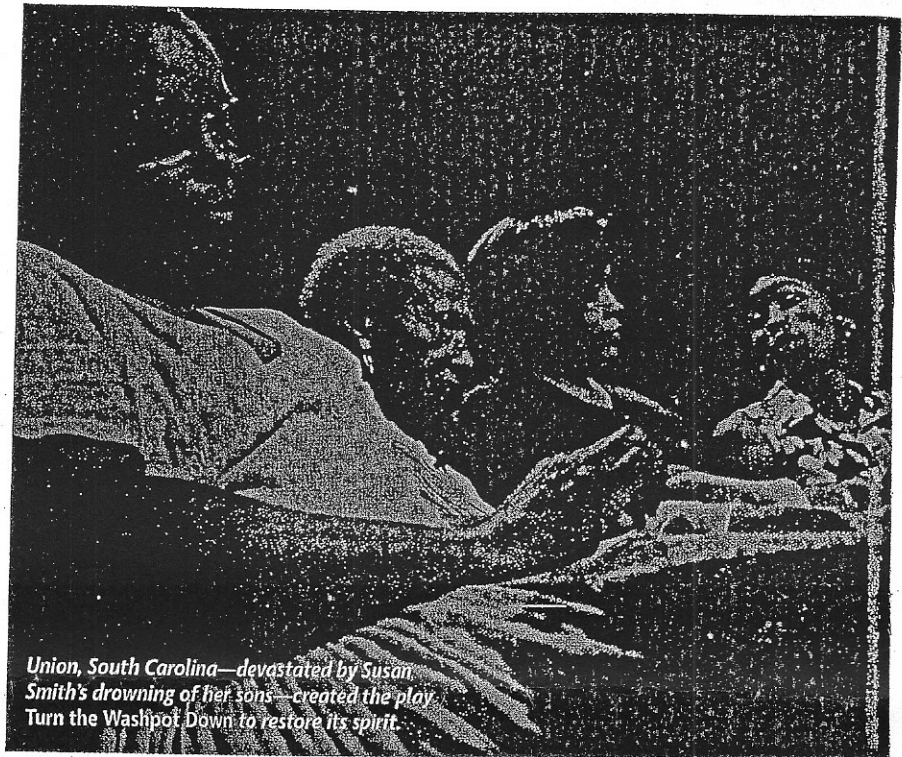


A More Perfect Union

A troubled Southern community turns to theater for healing

YOU COULD HEAR a pin drop in the theater tonight. It's not often you hear the word "nigger" on stage in the South. You certainly don't expect to hear it in a family-oriented musical production—and it's almost impossible to imagine a community rallying around such an unsettling work of art. But on this summer night in Union County, South Carolina, folks have gathered for the first time to witness—and perform—a communal theatrical creation called *Turn the Washpot Down*. There will never be another night like it, overflowing with the cheers and tears of people who have stuck with each other through many hard times.

The performance features a cast of about 100 black and white folks from this rural Southern community, telling the true stories of the people of Union County. These tales—many of them untold for centuries—are metaphorically hidden in an old washpot in the woods where slaves used to congregate in secret. The play is a group effort to pull Union County back from the brink of disintegration. The historic area is not only economically strapped with the collapse of the textile industry, it's also notorious as the home of Susan Smith, who in 1994 drowned her two children by driving her car into a lake, then invented a story of a black carjacker to take the blame. Two years



Union, South Carolina—devastated by Susan Smith's drowning of her sons—created the play Turn the Washpot Down to restore its spirit.

ago, Art Sutton, who owns local radio station WBCU, organized the citizens of Union County to consider doing something about its plight. Unlikely as it sounds, they turned to a cultural solution. They hired Community Performance Inc. (CPI) to come to Union and help them develop a play.

CPI IS A UNIQUE Chicago-based theater team that collaborates with communities on original plays to reenergize

town pride, discover or remodel their communal identity, heal the wounds of a crisis or a rift, or examine some burning social issue like homelessness or health care. Richard Owen Geer, CPI writer and director of *Turn the Washpot Down*, calls these projects "of, by, and for" the people.

CPI has been hired by groups in places ranging from Virginia to Florida to Colorado, from a close community of Mennonites in Newport News, Vir-

PETER BLANCHFORD

BY LINDA FRYE BURNHAM

from AMERICAN THEATRE

ginia, to a wildly diverse inner-city gang of neighbors in Chicago. Each project is completely unique to its setting.

Union County's hopes were based on the dazzling success of *Swamp Gravy*, a CPI-facilitated community play that turned the economy around in troubled Miller County, Georgia. Using CPI writer Jo Carson's method of gathering local stories from every level of local society and crafting them into a script, then adding Geer's creative direction with music and movement, Miller County inaugurated *Swamp Gravy* in an old cotton warehouse in Colquitt, Georgia, in 1991. The production was so successful at bridging the gap between the races and stretching the creative capacities of its citizens that it soon became recognized as the official "folk life play of Georgia," selling out to busloads of tourists each year. A rickety venture that started with \$2,000 in seed money now has a million-dollar budget, owns its own building, and has generated more than a dozen spinoff projects in Miller County. "[*Swamp Gravy*] is merely the most compelling experience I have ever had in the theater," wrote editor Ed Corson in the *Macon Telegraph*. "It was wonderful to see a community come together—black, white, young, old, rich, poor—and create a performance that is not only healing but also compelling, authoritative, confident theater."

That's what Sutton and his companions witnessed when they traveled to Colquitt in 2000 to see *Swamp Gravy* and assess the potential for such a project in Union. With the help of *Swamp Gravy* organizational director Bill Grow, they gathered support from people on the school board and pastors of the black churches. Grow also hooked them up with CPI.

Geer and his co-writer and director, Jules Corriere, each spent 13 weeks in South Carolina over the year and a half it took to produce the play, training a band of story gatherers to mine the narrative gold buried in the region. "They told us we had to have an opening question to start people thinking," one of the story collectors, retired Union County banker Ola Jean Kelly,

told the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*. "Most important, we just had to be quiet and listen. Transcribers took down everything verbatim—our language and vernacular. We had to. It's our oral history."

THE STORIES IN *Turn the Washpot Down* range from the innocence of preteens accidentally getting drunk on blackberry wine to more serious tales of broken dreams and broken families,

racial strife and shocking betrayal. A soldier is accidentally branded a deserter and the town shames his whole family. Two groups of boys, one black and one white, sneak into the "no-man's-land" beside the river that once racially divided Union to trade a box of peaches for a set of wheels. They are caught and stoned by men who "throw rocks at anyone who doesn't stay on their side of the river."

Periodically, a radio announcer interrupts the play with some comic relief, program segments from WBCU featuring country music, commercials for the local drugstore, and a virtual tour of the town on "The Happy Bus."

Playwright Corriere learned that slaves were forbidden to gather in public, so they met secretly in the woods and carried with them an iron washpot, believing that the pot would dampen the sounds of their whispered stories. The pot was turned upside down to hide each secret "so it don't get out to people who ain't ready to hear it yet," as a black character explains to the audience in the play's first scene. One by one, over the course of the play, townspeople approach the woods and the pot turns up as they spill out their stories.

The "n word" turns up in a story not about slavery, but about integration. It is told by an actor playing Leroy Worthy, a black man hired in 1964 by the owner of the Lockhart mill to integrate the workforce. But complications later ensue: "I was promoted to manager and I took another man's job, a white man, and he's still there, only now he's under me," Leroy says. "Sent his wife to tell me he wasn't gonna work for a nigger. I was prepared to deal with that a long time ago. I was 7 years old, got called that name, and my grandmother says to me, 'A nigger is somebody low and dirty. If that don't fit you, then walk on by, it doesn't apply.'"

"It wasn't as scary writing the piece—I knew what had to be in there," Corriere told me later. "Sure, I knew I was taking a risk with some of the material, but the real scary part happened when I heard it read out loud for the first time. When it's taken off the paper and put into mouths, it's a much more dangerous play than I realized," said the playwright. "I found myself almost wanting to soften it when I heard it out loud for the first time. I have to give the credit to the community, at least the community of actors performing the play, who said yes to telling these stories. They didn't want to settle for sweetness. They wanted to tell the hard stuff, and to prove how far they've come and that

they're willing to go further. God, I'm lucky to write for people like this."

BUT IN UNION, there's still an elephant in the room: Susan Smith. Corriere said few people ever brought her up in conversation. What did come up was story upon story about *good* parenting. One story, however, wasn't so nice. A character named Robert resists, but eventually pours out the desperate tale of his own childhood abuse, of a mother who didn't love him, beat him, emotionally strafed him for no reason, and lied to authorities about his age to send him off to war at 15, telling him not to come back if he lived. Later in the play, a multigenerational circle of black women are sitting and sewing, led by Janie Goree, the 82-year-old mayor of nearby Carlisle. She talks of her slave grandmother who bought her own freedom, yet remained on the plantation to be with her children. The women all remark on this example of mother love. Robert then reappears in the woods, raises the washpot above his head, and says, finally, "I forgive you." And with this, maybe Union forgave Susan Smith.

continued.

This is an intimate theater of place. Its potent impact is derived from its truth, the resonance of shared ordeals and delights, its portrait of a place like no other. For an audience member who is not a local, who doesn't know the cast or its family secrets, this work has another impact: the rich pleasure of seeing any town on the stage in all its naked diversity, struggling to make art together. And that spark is already igniting a fire. Boogaloo Broadcasting Company, the nonprofit that produces *Washpot*, has purchased the ruins of the burned-down textile mill that used to nurture and own this community. They plan to turn it into a theater and museum. *Washpot* is scheduled to be revived in 2003.

Once in a while in my travels, I see graffiti scrawled on a wall somewhere: "Art Saves Lives." I feel in my bones it is true. Even if *Turn the Washpot Down* doesn't save Union's life, it has already saved its soul.

LINDA FRYE BURNHAM was the founder of *High Performance* magazine. She is currently co-director of Art in the Public Interest and the Community Arts Network on the Internet. The Community Arts Network (www.communityarts.net) which keeps tabs on community-based local art across the country, from theater ensembles with deep regional roots to public art projects planned and executed in collaboration with local people. The art may be involved with education, health problems, prisoner rehabilitation, and other issues. Included on

the site is plenty of historical information on the community arts movement, which began as an outgrowth of efforts to beautify small towns in the 19th century and grew to include local historical pageants in the early 20th century; the civic theater movement beginning in the 1920s, the growth of local and state arts councils; and today's highly collaborative and innovative public-art projects. Reprinted from *American Theatre* (Dec. 2002). Subscriptions: \$35/yr. (10 issues) from 355 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.