



The 1970 Murder of a Black Man in Oxford Brings the N.C. Town Near Ruin in *Blood Done Sign My Name*

by Alan R. Hall

November 9, 2008, Raleigh, NC: The year was 1970 when, in Oxford, North Carolina, a young black man was beaten and shot on the town's streets. He died of his injuries the same night. One of the town's white preachers, a Methodist named Vernon Tyson, attempted to soothe racial tensions by planning to have a bi-racial burial ceremony for the youth; but hardly any whites attended. Young [Timothy Tyson](#), the son of Reverend Tyson and his wife, Martha, was greatly affected by this incident; and years later, attempted to speak with the man who was acquitted of shooting Henry Dortress "Dickie" Marrow, Jr. and ascertain why he killed Dickie. The story became a [book](#), filled with the real-life denizens of Oxford and the sinister racial tensions that existed and still exist there. Tyson titled the book after an old Negro spiritual, [Blood Done Sign My Name](#).

The [Duke Divinity School](#), in conjunction with playwright/actor [Mike Wiley](#), has sponsored a play Wiley adapted from the book. The play, with Wiley as the sole actor, ran for six performances in Duke's Sheaffer Theater and concluded Nov. 9th, before beginning a statewide tour of public and school performances. Using the spiritual itself and the book's title, Wiley's singular performance of *Blood Done Sign My Name* brought a series of packed houses to their feet to salute his adaptation and astonishing characterizations.

In 1970, the black residents who attended Dickie's funeral then marched to the gravesite. From there, they made their way to the Confederate statue in the town square. There they held a rally to celebrate Dickie's life, and put the whites on notice that this theft of one of their lives was not going to be forgotten. This single march frightened most of the whites in Oxford into thinking their businesses and their families were in peril. Finally, the marchers took the march outside of Oxford, and Granville County, and marched directly on Raleigh and the Governor's mansion. Despite a widely circulated advance notice of the march, the then-Governor of North Carolina was nowhere to be found when the group reached Raleigh.

According to the testimony at the trial of father and son Robert and Larry Teal, Marrow was beaten by the two because he had addressed a female relative of the Teals, using racially provocative language. Interestingly, this slur was uttered away from the public eye. The beating, however, along with a shotgun blast that sealed the young man's fate, took place in front of many witnesses on the street outside one of Robert Teal's businesses. These witnesses provided firsthand testimony of the event; however, an all-white jury found both Robert and Larry not guilty of the death.

The unfolding of this event onstage was accompanied by the a cappella singing of the hymn "Blood Done Sign My Name" and many other songs by vocalist Mary D. Williams, live from the catwalk above the Sheaffer Theater stage. The audience was encouraged to join in these hymns, and many did so enthusiastically. Wiley, himself an ever-changing figure, created an entire town of characters who participated, whether in a large or small way, in the "incident." A circle was drawn center stage, and most of the action took place near or even on this circular path. Within the circle were projected news items, quotes, and other relative information we could not help but read. The Reverend Tyson, along

with his family, left Oxford not long after this incident. Timothy B. Tyson returned a dozen years later to gather the information that would form the basis for his book, and thus this play. It is an astonishing work, both in its content and in its performance.

It is hard for someone who grew up during the last 50 years of the 20th century to imagine such an event taking place today. As it is, it is even difficult to remember that the event took place in 1970, which does not seem nearly 40 years ago. This play, witnessed as it was not only by six packed houses but also by Tyson himself, asks the obvious question: How is it, in a world supposedly governed by law, that a man can be found innocent of a murder so many saw him commit? It is a question that, now especially, after so historic an election, bears repetition. We can only hope that today, 40 years after the "incident" that cost Dickie Marrow his life, the result of the trial would be far different.

Note: A full-length version of *Blood Done Sign My Name* and an abridged school version of the play will tour North Carolina. For booking details, telephone 919/489-1541 or visit <http://www.goingbarefoot.com/>.

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