

Woman journeys inside racism issue

By Jamie Gumbrecht

HERALD-LEADER CULTURE WRITER

Eenie Meanie, the one-woman play Teresa Willis brings to Lexington this week, is muscle memory, like the childhood rhyme where it got its name. It's understandable, like instinctual fear during a riot. It's easy, like suburban life.

Which is to say that it's simple only on the outside, but complicated, painful and misunderstood underneath.

Willis, a performance poet who grew up in Valley Station and graduated from the University of Kentucky, wrote the one-woman, one-act play as an exploration of her experiences with race. The play follows her from childhood, when she was fascinated by a black piano tuner, to her teen years, when she was bused from the suburbs to another school. You see her memories of world events, broken hearts, healing hearts and her more current struggles to deal with her aging parents and their aging prejudices.

Performing the show for the first time in her home state, 45-year-old Willis says she knows she's "a little white girl talking about race," but it's "a new way of looking at an old problem."

Question: Why did you decide to write a piece about race?

Answer: I had the memory of being oddly sensitive about it as a child. As I grew older, I got jaded. That innocence and fascination shifted and there was pain, anger, apathy. In my 20s, I had a very ugly time with the issue. Then the riots in Los Angeles happened in 1992, and that was a turning point for me.

IF YOU GO

'Eenie Meanie'

What: A one-act play presented in Lexington by ActOut Theatre Group, benefiting Moveable Feast.

When: 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Wednesday in Lexington, 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday in Louisville.

Where: Downtown Arts Center, 141 E. Main St. in Lexington; Walden Theatre, 1123 Payne St. in Louisville.

Tickets: \$15-18 in Lexington, \$15 at the door in Louisville.

Call: (859) 225-0370 for Lexington shows.

On the Web:
www.eeniemeanie.com



Teresa Willis is an accomplished writer, actress and vocalist.

A: I really believe it's a wound, but if you don't acknowledge a pain, it mutates into anger and bigotry. If one goes back to the original pain and spends a little time there, you can heal it.

Q: How has the show changed since you began performing it in 2003?

A: I would go around to poetry readings in Los Angeles and read pieces of it. At this one reading, there were a smattering of black men and about five black women. I read a piece about Martin Luther King Jr., and I saw their eyes narrow. They leaned back, crossed their arms. It put into me this belief that I offended black women with this piece. A few years later, this audience of black women responded really well. It didn't occur to me until the next day that I knew all those black women were out there, and I wasn't nervous. I used to have that fear.

Q: Is there a particular moment in the show where we see you change?

A: There's a scene where I meet a black man on the street. It's the second day of the riots in L.A. He was walking toward the fires, and I was walking away from the fires. I was frozen in fear. In that moment, I catch myself being a bigot, being a racist, paralyzed with fear because this man's skin is dark. It's arguably because of the events, but I didn't expect that of myself. People really get that. It sets people up to look at their own feelings. I'm looking inside the whole time, and usually, that leads people to look inside themselves.

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