

## LETTING HISTORY BE THE JUDGE

**ODELL MCGHEE AND THE LANGSTON HUGHES PLAYERS PORTRAY THE TRAGEDIES AND TRIUMPHS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE.**

Polk County District Associate Judge Odell McGhee remembers how proud he felt in the early 1960s when his grandfather became the first African-American assistant election commissioner in southern Mississippi's Amite County. But he recalls the paralyzing fear even more vividly.

"The Ku Klux Klan threatened to hang him," says McGhee, now 55. "On

his first day of work, we watched him drive off in his pickup truck, and we knew he'd be hung by the end of the day."

His grandfather was left unharmed — "He was smiling when he drove back home," says McGhee — but that and other such incidents fueled McGhee's passion to share the African-American story. Today, as director of Des Moines' Langston Hughes Players, McGhee helps keep African-American history alive and relevant.

"We try to give audiences a basic understanding of what it means to be African-American," says McGhee, who joined the troupe in 1980 and has been its director since 1995. "I say to audiences, 'Feel free to laugh with us and to cry with us.'"

Through prose, poetry, music, dance and even humor, the 30-member troupe performs vignettes that re-enact four eras of African-American history: slavery, Jim Crow, the Harlem Renaissance and modern times. In celebration of Black History Month, the Langston Hughes Players will stage shows at schools, businesses, churches, community centers and other venues during February. The troupe also performs throughout the rest of the year.

"Young African-Americans don't know a lot (about history) because it's painful," says McGhee, who also writes many of the troupe's pieces. "Kids can go for months and not think about where they've come from. My children are unaware of the struggles; they think everything is easy. What we do is all about (enhancing) understanding and perspective."

As a young boy growing up in the segregated South, McGhee experienced some of the struggles he

now re-enacts on stage. Besides threatening his grandfather, the Klan chased his father, a sharecropper, out of town in the early 1960s. "He left on a midnight train," says McGhee. "The lynchings, the house burnings — I remember those."

McGhee's entire family soon joined his father in Chicago, where McGhee developed an interest in theater. He moved to Iowa to attend Cornell College in Mount Vernon. After earning a B.A. in secondary education and mathematics in 1974, he faced a choice: Hollywood or law school.

"I'm a big ham," says McGhee, "but I didn't have the guts to go to Hollywood." Instead, he studied law at Drake University, graduating in 1977. For the next 25 years, he served in various legal capacities, including assistant Polk County attorney, before being appointed district associate judge in 2002.

Although McGhee chose the legal profession, he never stopped nurturing his love for the theater. Over the years, he's performed in many productions at the Des Moines Playhouse and with the Drama Workshop and has directed shows as well, including "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "A Raisin in the Sun."

McGhee is also an avid gardener and a published poet. He says he writes poems for his children — 19-year-old Carey and 12-year-old Ty — and for his friends. He's married to former Des Moines School Board member Jacqueline Easley.

Despite the memories of segregation, McGhee still returns to Mississippi at least every two years for family reunions. "I feel at home in Des Moines, but I'm still a country boy and I'm still a Southern boy," he says. "It's in my blood." — CHRISTINE RICCELLI

**"EVERY DAY I'M LIVING MY DREAM. I TELL YOUNG PEOPLE, 'IF I CAN DO IT, YOU CAN DO IT.'"**  
—ODELL MCGHEE

