

BWW Review: PPT's Regional Premiere ALABAMA STORY Defends Freedom to Read in Poignant Production

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by [Peggy Sue Dunigan](#)



Photo Credit: Len Vilano

Pictured from Left to Right: Greg Vinkler, James Leaming, Byron Glenn Willis, Katherine Keberlein, Harter Clingman, Carmen Roman

Once again, Peninsula Players imports a fresh new play first produced in 2015 direct from Utah to Door County. Playwright [Kenneth Jones'](#) *Alabama Story* received a first regional premiere at the award-winning Fish Creek theater in a story where an innocent children's book by Garth Williams--"The Rabbits' Wedding"--incites civil unrest in Montgomery, Alabama, 1959.

Based on a true story of Alabama State Librarian Emily Wheelock Reed, the play speaks to defending Williams' children's story for a place on Alabama's bookshelves. A sweet tale about a black bunny marrying a white bunny in a forest surrounded by animal friends, State Senator E.W. Higgins (actually E.O. Eddins in real time), creates a media sensation protesting the book because he believes the story promotes integration, and more clearly, interracial marriage. In 1950's Alabama, the skin colors black and white were prevented from marrying or sitting on the same outdoor benches. PPT Scenic Designer [Jack Magaw](#) makes magic with high books stacks that move with ease on stage to create walls and outside worlds on stage, and stamps a park bench clearly with the segregationist words: WHITES ONLY

The bench represents a divide between the confused Lily, an endearing [Katherine Keberlein](#) dressed in Costume Designer Karin Simonson Kopiske's lovely full skirts,, and Joshua, the debonair [Byron Glenn Willis](#), a white girl and black man, who grew up in the same house in rural Alabama sharing Blaine Cake-only on opposite sides of the

social status. Attracted to each other in their youth, their affection for each other lingers when they meet in the Montgomery park when Lily's father recovers in the hospital. The audience amazed at how provocative these scenes would have been in 1959, or even earlier when their lives are captured in flashback.

Director Brendon Fox inspires the best from the six member cast, including [Carmen Roman](#), a delightful yet determined Emily Reed, who often uses humor and intelligence to match wits with her opponents. The daughter of a doctor, Reed follows her heart while withstanding the forces of [Greg Vinkler](#)'s impressive Senator Higgins, staunch in his belief that "the old South" traditions prevail. Roman also develops a tender chemistry with her personal administrative assistant, the loyal [Al Thomas](#) Franklin, a caring [Harter Clingman](#).

In brief interludes throughout the performance, [James Leaming](#) stars as the children's book author, Williams. He asserts and explains the controversy over "The Rabbits' Wedding," where this black and white rabbit, was a book designed for graphic clarity: white and black rabbits create contrast and a more interesting picture book. To take that premise further, color contrast creates perhaps a more fascinating cultural diversity and also pictures how adults can misconstrue the most innocent stories when they add their grown up prejudices to what a child sees as merely two basic colors.

Jones' poignant play touches the human heart with the pressures of politics and racial prejudices on multiple levels, the personal and the public. The PPT playbill describes the play's setting "as the Deep South and beyond." What happened in 1959 lingers beyond in America's 21st century. Current news headlines repeat the atrocities of "white only" benches in more subtle ways that produce prejudice or perhaps walls at the American-Mexican borders or suspicions regarding Muslim citizens. Jones' *Alabama Story* transcends one state to the entire country-a microcosm of America's Story. Underscoring the racial themes, the story celebrates the freedom of anyone, child or adult, to awaken their curiosity and cultural views through a book, a story, a novel, sometimes filled with pictures by turning the pages one by one in wonder. Reed's character answers the Senator with the statement to "appropriate only Alabama books" with the fact that if anyone in Alabama wants to learn about building an igloo, the library guarantees them the freedom to learn about Inuit cultures whether building an igloo in Alabama might be feasible. What a joy to have the libraries in this country-still free-for anyone to use.

While Nooks and iPads might change the course of how the public and students read, the library remains a testament to the beauty of a hardbound book, and the inherent freedom to choose what to read. In the past, numerous books have been banned, and then justifiably restored, including the noted [Mark Twain](#)'s "[Tom Sawyer](#)" and "[Huckleberry Finn](#)" named in Jones' play on occasion, yet freedom prevails. with these stories, too.

This summer, PPT offers a spectacular opportunity to catch Jones' premiere play on the professional stage, right here in Fish Creek, a unique privilege for any theatergoer. Sitting in the theater after a Door County sunset, audiences will treasure this timely tribute to human character and small freedoms, remember moments in their own hometown libraries, or the books they personally cherished. The play's final moments might melt the audiences's heart-when the gift of a book heals wounds between adversaries and would-be romantics.

What an awe inspiring thought to take away from Jones' revealing play about who we are and can be, and how change might be possible in only one person's small world. Character qualities mirrored in the heroics of one woman. Librarian Emily Wheelock Reed persevered, which casts another lesson in this play exposing the power of one to defend America's constitution from a desk in a library. This fall, read a book and be glad America continually represents this freedom for every person in a glorious rainbow of skin colors who can now sit together in a library.

Peninsula Players presents a regional premiere of Alabama Story in Fish Creek through September 4. For further information regarding this play, or their final play of the season, 39 Steps beginning September 7, please call: 920.868.4287 or www.peninsulaplayes.org.