

# On My Way: One Actor's Creative Journey

By Mike Wiley\*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 49:1 (fall 2009).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

*I was on my way; Nailed inside my wooden box with three tiny breathing holes and a sign on the side with the scribbling, "THIS END UP!" With a tug and a chug, the train lurched forward splintering my hands as I grasped the insides of the crate. My head swam with the smell of burning coal from the train's engine and pine from the box, but just before the cramping in my legs subsided . . . the train groaned to a halt.*

—Henry "Box" Brown

The runaway slave narrative of Henry "Box" Brown represents a fantastic tale of suspense and adventure—of love, loss, and great danger. Brown's true story was published in the early 1850s but has only recently been dusted off and given its due attention. This crafty enslaved man shocked the city of Richmond, Virginia, and perhaps the entire country, by mailing himself from the hub of the soon-to-be Confederacy to a new life of freedom in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Brown's story could easily have gone unheard in the pre-Civil War age of horse-drawn buggies and riverboat steamers. But this would-be showman was bound and determined to share it. Soon after his improbable escape, Brown began traveling the free roads of the North with his box in tow, recounting the journey that earned him his freedom and his nickname.

*My ears strained to hear the fate that lay in my path as my wooden crate took flight. My bubbling stomach soon told me that some workers had placed me on a boat and to make the matter worse, my box which was to remain right side up, was now upside down!*

—Henry "Box" Brown

Over one hundred years later, I adapted Henry Brown's story for the stage. I have performed it for thousands of students around North Carolina. How does this fit into my creative journey?

In 1995 I graduated from Catawba College in Salisbury with dreams of Hollywood and New York dancing in my head. Sadly, those dreams were wrestled awake by the realities of show business. I found myself making my way down a tough road that wasn't inspiring the creativity I knew swirled inside me. I began to focus on my first love: *documentary theater*. Most theater professionals describe documentary theater as "theater that wholly or in part uses preexisting documentary material [such as newspapers, government reports, interviews, and the like] as source material for the script, ideally without altering its wording."

My hope was to find an individual or event in African American history that historians had overlooked. For years, African American history—as well as the historic contributions of many other ethnic cultures—had mostly been left out of United States classrooms. In fact, until recently, few recognized the contributions of African Americans such as craftsman Thomas Day

and Wimbledon champion Althea Gibson, both North Carolinians. I wanted to change that, for the sake of kids who didn't see themselves reflected in their textbooks.

Even though I am an ardent fan of history, I only stumbled upon Henry Brown's tale by accident. I received, by coincidence, a postcard with an illustration depicting his marvelous escape—an escape I knew nothing about. Turning to a number of history books and articles, I was dismayed to find very little information about Brown's journey. Like a good detective, I took the basic facts I had in hand to the source of the material: the Virginia State Library. There I found, among other primary sources, Brown's autobiography. I was able to use this and other information on the lives of enslaved people in Virginia as subject matter. I interviewed history professors and slavery scholars to gain a more complete picture of the life and times of my play's main character.

Once all of the research was done, I created an outline of Brown's life and then a more specific outline of his escape and the days leading up to it. All the while, I asked myself, "What price would I pay for my freedom?" I began telling Brown's story by answering that question through his eyes. Improvising (inventing or creating) some conversations and monologues based on my primary source documents as a starting point, I was able to find Brown's speaking voice, as well as the "voice" of his inner desires. Returning to that question of freedom often, I eventually completed the play *One Noble Journey*, which I have performed as a one-man drama and comedy, casting myself as all eighteen characters.

Because this documentary writing process worked for me, I kept using the style. Early on, I chose stories about people seeking change within or for themselves, as in Brown's desire to find freedom. In more recent years, I have chosen stories about people seeking to change the world around them, such as Jackie Robinson or Martin Luther King Jr. I could have easily let the fear of the responsibility of portraying such important Americans overtake and enslave me, but I persevered. I let my love of storytelling and performance take over—a love I'd found at an early age.

When I was a sixth-grade student, a teacher asked if I didn't mind performing the role of Abraham Lincoln in the spring play. Having never said much of anything in front of a crowd, I dug into my history books and pulled out my best four-foot-tall honest Abe. That memory helped push me to keep sharing stories from our American past. As *One Noble Journey* was becoming more popular, I began looking for a brand-new "old" tale to tell. I needed a story that put inner character first. I found it in the Negro Baseball League and the rise of Jackie Robinson, another ambitious self-starter and humble hero. Robinson was the first black major-league baseball player in the modern age. He inspired a generation of Americans to dust off their failures, shake off their rejections, and get back into the game. My play, *Jackie Robinson: A Game Apart*, asks the question, "What would I do if faced with prejudice or bigotry?"

Writing dramas based on actual history gives me the chance to work within the boundaries of documented events, while playing with and imagining those unknown moments and people who existed beyond the pen or lens of an eyewitness. Jackie, Henry, and the countless other characters I portray could easily get lost in the dust and the clutter that is American history. Thanks to the detective work of lots of authors, historians, and even actors like me, we are

forever bound by the patchwork that makes up our stories here in North Carolina and around the world.

*And I emerged from my wooden box victorious; victorious over my journey; victorious over my master and victorious over the great sword of slavery. I was a free man. Equal and able to stand erect in the company of all men!*

—Henry “Box” Brown

*\*An M.F.A. graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Mike Wiley strives to expand cultural awareness for audiences of all ages, through dynamic portrayals based on pivotal moments in African American history. In doing so, he hopes to help unveil a richer picture of the total American experience. At the time of this article’s publication, Wiley was Lehman Brady Visiting Professor at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies.*