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**DOUGLAS TURNER WARD'S CONTROVERSIAL SATIRE *DAY OF ABSENCE*
COMES TO HELMS THEATRE BEGINNING OCTOBER 23**

**U.Va. Department of Drama Production Uses Broad Humor And Reverse Minstrel
“Whiteface” Approach to Tackle Issues of Race And Class In Our Society**

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA – October 13, 2008 – As Americans prepare to go to the polls and confront the issue of race relations in our society head on, The University of Virginia Department of Drama is presenting one of the theater-world's most intriguing racial satires of all time. Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* is a one-act broad satire, written in 1965, that explores what happens in a fictional southern town one day when all of the black people suddenly disappear.

Ward, one of the icons of African-American theater, paints a world where the sudden disappearance of his race causes a fictional small southern town, and the world that surrounds it, to come apart at the seams. Parents are unable to care for their babies. Businesses are unable to function as they had the day before. And governments themselves begin to collapse under the weight of its increasingly agitated and helpless citizenry. The next day, when the black people return as quickly as they left, life in the town goes right back to “normal.” Or does it?

Day of Absence will run at the Helms Theatre from October 23-25, October 28-31 and November 1. All performances begin at 8 p.m. Single tickets are \$14 for adults; \$12 for seniors and U.Va. faculty, staff and Alumni Association members; and \$8 for students. Full-time U.Va. students can use their **Arts\$ Dollars** as a form of payment to purchase both individual show and season tickets. Tickets can be ordered by calling the Drama Box Office at 434-924-3376 or by visiting the Culbreth Theatre Monday through Friday between the hours of 1 p.m. and 5 p.m..

Adding to the unique power and appeal of the play is the fact that Ward wrote it, and U.Va. Drama will present it, in a reverse minstrel style, with African-American actors performing in whiteface portraying Caucasian characters.

Director Theresa M. Davis says the play should serve as an equal opportunity eye-opener. “I think there is a danger if we think the exposing being done in this play is only for white America. The issue is bigotry. I think it is a sending up of bias and prejudice and bigotry and some of the things we still think about whether or not we like to admit it in terms of race relations and how we view people who are different than we are.”

The context of the time in which the play is being presented is hardly lost on Davis and her cast. “The original production was done with a red, white and blue theme,” she said. “We have decided not to go in that direction, but of course we think about the election that is coming up, where race has been such an integral part of the conversation, so I think there is a particular relevance in doing the piece as we are having a higher level of discourse about race and culture in this country.”

The fact that Ward’s chosen mode of truth telling is humor works particularly well for the message, Davis said. “*The New York Times*, in its review when the play opened in the 60’s, said that “laughter can be used as effectively as anger in telling white America what the Negro had on his mind.” For me, what is particularly relevant is the fact that it is a satire, and a satire above all else has a corrective nature that is different from parody. It gives us irony and sarcasm and a caustic wit that, in the end, are all used to attack and expose folly.”

The 2008-2009 season will continue with the all-time musical theater classic *Oklahoma!*, which comes to the Culbreth Theatre from November 20-22 and December 3-5, 2008.

The season will also include the surreal dreamscape *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Culbreth, February 12-14 & 18-21, 2009); *Fuddy Meers*, a tale of a wild farcical day in the life of a family like no other you have ever met before (Helms, March 19-21 & 24-28, 2009) and Shakespeare’s early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (April 16-18 & 22-25, 2009).

Culbreth season subscriptions are currently on sale and are available for \$38 Adult, \$33 Senior and U.Va. faculty/ staff/alumni, \$26 Student and may be ordered by calling the Drama Box Office at 434-924-3376 or by visiting Culbreth Theatre Monday through Friday between the hours of 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.. Tickets for each individual production will go on sale approximately two weeks prior to the opening date.

Parking is available at the Culbreth Road Parking Garage. Opened last spring, the garage is free of charge and located mere steps from the theatres.

Press images for day of Absence are available at <http://www.virginia.edu/drama/press.htm>.

For complete information on the 2008-2009 season, visit www.virginia.edu/drama.

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