

ALABAMAARTS

Volume XVIII

Number 1

SPRING/SUMMER 2002



On the cover: "Snow Moon" by Sue Anne Hoyt. Oil on board, 5 1/2" x 8". Sue Anne Hoyt lives in Clanton, Alabama. She is a professional artist who received her MFA from Auburn University in 1999. Her work has been exhibited extensively throughout the region, including one-person shows at Kentuck Museum in Northport and Auburn University at Montgomery.

Library of Congress Card No. 74628447

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Alabama State Council on the Arts

Mission Statement

The mission of the Alabama State Council on the Arts is to promote Alabama's diverse and rich artistic resources while highlighting excellence and educational experiences.

The Agency

The Alabama State Council on the Arts is the official state agency for the support and development of the arts in Alabama. It was established in 1966 by an act of the Alabama Legislature. The agency supports not-for-profit arts organizations, programming in the arts for the general public, and individual artists. The State Arts Council works to expand the state's cultural resources and preserve its unique cultural heritage and places a high priority on arts programming by and for schools. The Council's primary means of supporting the arts and making the arts more accessible to varied audiences is through a multi-faceted grants program which covers all disciplines and fields of creative expression.

The Council

The fifteen members of the Council are drawn from communities throughout the state. They are appointed by the Governor for six-year terms, and selection is based on expertise in the arts, business, or community affairs. The officers of the Council are elected by its members.

The Council meets four times each year, at various locations throughout the state. It approves agency programs and policies, develops long range plans, and makes final decisions on state and federal grant dollars under its jurisdiction.

Breaking New Ground in the Arts

by Al Head

Breaking new ground in the arts is not only the life-blood of artists; human exploration in the arts is also the life-blood of a progressive society relying on creative energy to move forward. New work in the arts is also a reflection of a culture that is in a constant state of flux. Our culture is changing as a result of shifting values, rapidly advancing technology, economic conditions, political unrest, globalization, the evolving roles of church and state and differing manifestations regarding the “pursuit of happiness.” As has been true since the recording of history, artists are holding the mirror of our world in their hands.

Creative expression and the unique vision of artists significantly impact what we think, see, hear, touch and read every day. Artists tell our story as a people, past, present and future and the vehicles used to communicate, at one time or another, are the result of “new work.” In the arts, what speaks to us most profoundly is the finished product, through diverse images, sounds or words, but the process of art making is an important element unto itself. Creative thinking, expression, and learning are process-oriented and, ideally, become a way of life. An aesthetic way of thinking and processing information influences the way we behave and the important choices we make regarding the environment in which we live.

In Alabama, we have an abundance of new artistic work being created daily. We have many talented artists creating work in virtually all disciplines, involving every aspect of the performing, visual and literary arts. Their work can be seen in schools, in outdoor community spaces, on stage, on screen, in books, in galleries, in public buildings and in homes. Their work provides character and vitality to our state in ways unlike any other field of human endeavor. The new work is coming from all age groups, ethnic groups, genders, social backgrounds and geographical areas. The result is a mosaic of style and form that is impressive by any standard of evaluation. Some of the work is inspired by a “sense of place,” clearly reflecting Alabama roots, while other art draws on more universal themes and influences. We have reason to be proud

and excited about the work that is being done. One does not have to go to New York to see excellent new work in the arts. It can be found in all parts of Alabama.

So, what is my point in writing about new work by artists in Alabama? The point is to issue a challenge to Alabamians to support the new work being done in all areas of the performing, visual and literary arts. Go to exhibits, performances, screenings and readings of new work. This work is not hard to find. If you think new work is seldom presented in Alabama, you are wrong. Seek and you will find. Buy tickets, books, paintings and craft items. My guess is that you will not only enjoy the experience, but you will be impressed, inspired and enriched.

This issue of *AlabamaArts* attempts to highlight some of the new work that has been and is being done in the state. The articles deal with both the product and process of art-making, in order to provide you with a more complete appreciation for the work. An effort has been made to reflect the diversity of work being done and the unique artists living in our state. Clearly, difficult choices had to be made regarding inclusion for publication. Obviously, there are many more artists out there worthy of attention. Hopefully you will be a bit more motivated after reading this issue of *AlabamaArts* to seek out both the artists and their work. You might even be inspired to commission a piece of new work yourself. ■

*Al Head is the
Executive Director
of the Alabama State
Council on the Arts.*



THE AWAKENING OF “*Desire*”

The creative process behind Winthrop Corey’s new ballet

by Marie S. Grip

Photography by Shelia Hagler

“How are you going to do that?” was a question frequently posed to Winthrop Corey when he announced that he was planning a new ballet based on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Tennessee Williams classic. “At first, I wasn’t sure,” said Corey. “I knew it would be difficult.”

Corey, artistic director of the Mobile Ballet, was initially inspired to create the work while watching Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh, and Kim Hunter in Elia Kazan’s 1951 film, made under the watchful eye of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Williams. Corey had wanted to create a second original full-length ballet following the 1998 premiere of his acclaimed *Dracula*, feeling that he “needed to do more.” For a time, he considered various children’s stories—*Hansel and Gretel*, *Beauty and the Beast*—but ultimately was struck by the film of *Streetcar*. “I saw marvelous *pas de deux* opportunities that told of a broad range of emotions, and I thought, ‘This might be interesting’.”

While excited about the possibilities he saw in the three main characters—the fading Southern belle,

Blanche; her sister, Stella; and Stella’s brutish husband, Stanley—Corey was aware that, for a full-length ballet, he needed to create more than three roles. He also knew that certain elements of the film were unsuited to a ballet: “In the film, everybody met in the bowling alley, and that, I knew, would not work onstage. So I thought, ‘What has the flavor of New Orleans?’”

He envisioned a smoky honky-tonk jazz club. “Jazz is not my idiom; I’m not that well-versed in it, but I do have enough friends in the field who could help me with it. I thought that, as far as the story goes, it would work. I could place all the principals in the jazz club and they could meet one another, and I could set the story line up within that context.”

Corey felt that while he could easily introduce his characters in the jazz club setting, the task of explaining how Blanche DuBois had arrived at that particular place at that particular point in her life was no easy task. He had to, in effect, conjure a past for Blanche and establish how she arrived in New Orleans in a state close to madness. In the



The cotillion scene was added to warn the audience as to what was to come.

play, Blanche had suffered an early, disastrous marriage, but Corey felt that would be difficult to depict onstage. Although he knew he was taking liberties with Tennessee Williams' written word, he felt the playwright would not have objected to his solution—a military

cotillion set in a time and place worlds apart from the seedy, immediately post-war French Quarter setting into which Blanche had descended. Because Blanche and Stella had grown up in a privileged society family, employing this device wasn't too much of a reach. It also provided a perfect setting in which to place the young Blanche—so different from the Blanche who arrived years later on her sister's squalid doorstep. "This (the cotillion) showed a time when Blanche was very happy, blossoming into young womanhood and the passions were very gentle. I wanted to contrast that with what happened later on, when the passions became ugly," explains Corey.

Having grown up in St. Louis, which he describes as "neither North nor South", Corey relied on some of his Mobile friends who are well-versed in Southern rituals, to school him in the parlance of cotillions. "I went to a lot of people and asked a lot of questions, and then designed a ballet within the ballet, a 23-minute exercise in dance for six young cadets and 12 young girls."

The "military ball" aspect



Stanley (Ian Carney) and Stella (Zoë Lombard-Todd)

of the scene presented its own set of opportunities. "Choreographically, I challenged myself; usually when you get 18 or 20 people onstage, you either face front, or you face side, and I wanted to build all of these dances on diagonals, which I had really never done in any of the ballets I've created." The young dancers faced challenges, as well, says Corey: "It was difficult for the dancers, hard for them to stay in line and do the same thing while maintaining the rigid formation that I really wanted, but they did it."

The atmosphere in the scene is initially romantic and light, but hints at what ultimately is to come for Blanche, when several of the young cadets treat her roughly and try to take advantage of her innocence. Explains Corey: "I wanted to create an atmosphere of 'after the ball', and what could possibly happen, maybe in a parking lot, or behind a building, when the cadets get slightly out of line with Blanche. I couldn't imagine another scene change, so I left it in the ballroom, lowered the lights and had everybody leave." When Blanche returns for a forgotten bouquet, she is confronted by one cadet who initially approaches her gently, but then gets a little rough, and finally is joined by two others who get rougher still. These were "not nice men", explains Corey, of



Blanche (Meg Gurin Paul) and Mitch (Todd Eric Allen)

the type that Blanche would attract repeatedly through her life. “I think she kept attracting men who were not quite so nice to ‘fix’ what had happened to her when she was young. It’s all very psychological.”

Corey crafted the jarring end of the cotillion to warn the audience as to what was to come. The music for the scene is a Duke Ellington tune which “fit it to a T”, according to Corey.

Not surprisingly, music is the driving force behind all of Corey’s choreography: “I can’t go anywhere step-wise without it.” Selecting the right music for this ballet was a particular challenge: “Finding it took a little over a year. It was really, really difficult. It had to be stylized, it had to have a flavor of the region, and it had to have a dramatic quality.” Corey went through his own music library, bought “crates” of CDs, and put the word out among his friends. It was his ballet mistress, Ann Duke, who suggested the ballet’s pivotal piece. “Ann had heard a piece of music and said, ‘Wink, you just might want to listen to this.’”

The piece was Wagner’s overture to *Tristan und Isolde*, which Corey had in his collection but had never considered for a ballet set in the grimy French Quarter. It became the music for the *pas de deux* between Stanley and Blanche, and “worked perfectly.” The additional music for the ballet came from a wide variety of composers: John Barry, Emmanuel Chabrier, Emil Darzin, Duke Ellington, Joseph Kuhns, Ennio Morricone, Michael Nyman, Jean Sibelius, and Richard Wagner. The flavor of the selections ranged from the steamy (Ellington) to the stately (Sibelius and Wagner.)

With music in place, the task of “writing the book” and creating the choreography began in earnest. On a trip to one of his favorite places, Las Vegas, Corey happened to envision a particular lift; this gave him a nudge in the right direction, and he began to write down steps. Three hours later, he had more than enough choreography for the music, and ended up having to edit. “That’s just what you want—to come up with more steps than you can use.”

While the dance muse seemed to have been laboring efficiently, the monumental task of designing and creating



Stanley (Ian Carney) and Stella (Zoë Lombard-Todd)

costumes and sets loomed large. The play itself clearly suggested the late 1940s or early 1950s. Corey then simply “looked it up in a book” to find the styles of the day, with the assistance of New York designer and longtime collaborator Ron Altman. Jazz club outfits were swifty shirtwaists and sundresses in a variety of colors and fabrics—all authentic to the era. Corey himself shopped for eight months for the men’s clothes, picking up just the right pieces here and there. Silk and chiffon were used for the white cotillion gowns because of their wonderful quality of movement onstage. Corey himself made 26 of the costumes; all those for Blanche and Stella, the 12 white cotillion gowns, and four of the jazz club dance dresses. Veteran wardrobe mistress Marian Blake and her corps of “costume ladies” made the rest. Timing was essential. “The costume patterns for Stella (Meg Gurin Paul) had to be ready for fitting an entire year in advance, when she was in town for *Cinderella* (March 2001).”

Sets for the production, ranging from a New Orleans neighborhood with the open-fronted (for artistic

purposes) apartment belonging to Stella and Stanley, to the smoky, strobe-lit jazz club, and the ultra-sophisticated 1930s era cotillion ballroom, were conceived by Mobile designer Ron Barrett and his team. As magnificently as they turned out, the sets had an inauspicious beginning: "I went to lunch with Ron Barrett and talked about what I wanted, and he drew on a plain old paper napkin," Corey laughs. That same napkin was given to Bob Swisher, Mobile Ballet's multi-talented construction wizard, as the blueprint.

Following several production meetings, Swisher, along with helpers, brought the sets to earthy, vibrant, glorious life. Perhaps the most breathtaking component of all the sets was the series of six enormous mirrors hanging at an angle to reflect the dancers at the cotillion. "I wanted to create the effect of multiplying the number of dancers in the scene—the mirrors worked," says Corey.

While the music, choreography, costumes and sets are essential, the key element is the dancers. When asked if he created the ballet with specific dancers in mind, Corey mused: "I imagine I must have. I needed dancers who were mature enough to bring to the roles their life experience, and to combine it with mine, and come out with a performance. There was wonderful collaboration. Meg, Ian, and Zoë were all perfect." (Meg Gurin Paul is a former Joffrey dancer and frequent Mobile Ballet guest; Ian Carney is a New Orleans native and principal dancer with the Montgomery Ballet; Zoë Lombard-Todd is a longtime principal dancer with Mobile Ballet.) Perfect, perhaps, but pulling everyone together was a choreographer's nightmare. "I had cast members in four cities (Mobile, New York, Montgomery and Pensacola), and had to wonder, would they all be doing the same ballet?" The principals were joined by the talented young members of the Joffrey Dance Ensemble, and Mobile Ballet's own dancers. Corey didn't even see the entire cast perform together



Mitch (Todd Eric Allen) and Blanche (Meg Gurin Paul)

until the Thursday dress rehearsal before a Friday morning school performance. "It was a gamble, with heart and instincts and emotions. But it worked." Corey was especially delighted when Harvey Hysell, longtime fixture on the New Orleans ballet scene, approached him after a performance. "You know," said Hysell, "there was no cotillion in Mr. Williams' play ... but it made it better." High praise, indeed.

After such a lengthy and emotionally charged two-year process, is Winthrop Corey ready to rest on

his laurels? Absolutely not. Corey and Scott Jovovich (recently of the Broadway cast of *Fosse*) are already investigating a co-production of a ballet version of *Moulin Rouge*. "With the costumes, it would have great production value. And, with two companies sharing, you essentially have twice the budget."

One could reasonably expect a new ballet as ambitious as *Moulin Rouge* to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. However, sets and costumes for *A Streetcar Named Desire* cost about \$16,000, due to the gifted volunteers at Mobile Ballet (including Corey, who donates his costume-creating skills). With his cadre of eager and capable friends, Corey and Mobile Ballet, unlike the unlucky Blanche, certainly won't be left to rely solely on the kindness of strangers. ■

Marie S. Grip is a native of Boston, Massachusetts, and holds a B.A. in English from Boston College. She has written on travel, education, and the arts, with articles appearing in The Virginian Pilot/Ledger Star in Norfolk, Virginia, and The Catholic Week in Mobile. A longtime resident of Mobile and active community volunteer, she has been Director of Development of Mobile Ballet for four years.

"Project Alabama"

HIGH FASHION FROM THE DEEP SOUTH

by Sunshine Huff



The garments are hip and elegant at the same time and command high prices—as much as \$350 to \$400 in Barney's or Fred Segal's for a top like this one.

Natalie Chanin leads the kind of life that most would consider glamorous. A beautiful young fashion designer, she has spent the day before this one in Los Angeles, and last week she was in Paris at the *pret-a-porter* (ready-to-wear) shows. However, glamour is not the first word that comes to mind as you enter her headquarters—a brick ranch-style house out

in the country not far from Florence, Alabama, in which the living room has been converted to a cutting room and the former bedrooms to administrative offices.

As Natalie greets you and offers "the best espresso in the county," she's wearing well-used sweatpants and sneakers, with a triangle of scrap cotton knit tied around her hair, and an unusual apron/tool belt wrapped around her waist. Four telephones are stuffed into various pockets or hung from the apron, and one of them seems to be ringing constantly. She explains that this is not standard practice, but she's accumulated all of them on her person during the morning: one phone is exclusively for communication with her business partner, two are regular lines, and

one is the fax line she uses when she knows she's going to have a long conversation. You understand right away that she's not trying to impress anyone; she's just very, very busy. And very, very focused.

Natalie herself would hardly apply the word "glamorous" to her career choice. As she says (speaking a bit metaphorically), "You spend five minutes designing a line, then five months selling it and producing the orders. Filling orders is not fun—it's doing the same thing over and over again."

It might come as a surprise to the uninitiated that the design



Our state's name takes pride of position in these coutoure designs.

aspect, the part of the process that is considered to be “creative,” is such a small slice of the time it takes to produce a line of high-fashion garments. But it would be short-sighted to think that the opportunity for creativity is confined exclusively to the designing of the garments.

On the contrary, Natalie Chanin and her partner, Enrico Marone-Cinzano, have incorporated some very creative thinking into the planning of their company. In fact, one of the most original aspects of the operation is the method the two have come upon for the actual sewing of the garments. They employ “70 lovely ladies of north Alabama,” as Natalie terms them, to cut and hand-stitch the garments she designs.



The garment styles vary; some are weskits or bustiers. All are made unique with elaborate needlework.

(Some of the lovely ladies actually live in south Tennessee—the state line poses no barrier!)

As with many of the best ideas, necessity was the mother of this invention. When Natalie first began her independent career as a fashion designer (after beginning in the business as an assistant designer/office manager who located and priced trimming materials for a New York junior sportswear company), she was making her original tee-shirts herself. But then, after a couple of mentions in the Italian and French versions of *Vogue*, she had so many orders she couldn't possibly fill them all by herself.

That's when she remembered the quilters she had known when she was growing up in Lauderdale County. She realized that she was using the same stitches on her tee-shirts that they used in making their quilts. So she came back home to find the help she needed.

“We're making our production goals,” Natalie says of her home-based staff, “and we have more than \$250,000 in orders to fill this season. One store took 200 pieces.”

The system that the women and Natalie have devised is based on a very tight tracking schedule. As the orders come in, each stitcher is assigned certain garments or parts of garments; she works in her own home on a specified deadline to execute the appliqué, reverse appliqué, embroidery, beading, and/or overdyeing the design requires. Garment seams are often hand-stitched, many times with the seam allowances on the right side of the garment to add texture and interest.

“As home-grown as Project Alabama may appear, we are a textile industry here, with the same problems that a New York manufacturer would face,” Natalie emphasizes. “Our standards are extremely high. We have never had a garment returned.”

The women laugh when their families joke that one day they're going off to “get a real job.”

“This is a real job,” they say, and they mean it. From the first time out, in February of 2001, when Project Alabama had orders from eight stores, to one year later, in March of 2002, the number of stores has quadrupled. Now 32 clients have ordered from the company, and many of them re-order during the season.

“Most orders are at least twenty pieces, although several have been for more, in a couple of instances for as many as 200 pieces. As a store re-orders, they nearly always increase the number of pieces they want,” says Natalie. Those “70 lovely ladies” are the backbone of the business, the reason that Natalie knows she can accept such large orders and re-orders.

The business that Natalie and her partner are building is based on this line of hand-stitched clothing that is made from recycled cotton tee-shirts. Natalie remarks that she has moved from buying individual tee-shirts from every thrift shop she passes to buying in bulk from a clearing-house for the Salvation Army. She dyes the shirts, and cuts away the knit neckbands and sleeves before she uses them in her own garments. The product line has evolved, in one short year, from just tops to a full line of dresses, pants, coats,

shorts, and bathing suits.

How does one achieve such success in such a short time? There are several reasons, and Natalie is quick to recognize them. She says she had an “amazing” education at North Carolina State in Raleigh. Her major was design theory, with a minor in textiles. NC State grew out of the famous artists’ colony of the 1930s known as Black Mountain, and Natalie found herself thriving in the Bauhaus-based, very conceptual, design discipline. A young mother when she

applied for admission, she says a bit of luck was involved in her selection. She and the person with whom she interviewed discovered that they shared a love of *The Alexandria Quartet*, by Lawrence Sanders, and they spent much of the interview time talking about literature. She loved the school.

“The emphasis was on Process, on teaching people how to think,” Natalie remembers. When asked if she was in over her head when she started at NC State, she blithely replies, “Sure. I’m always ‘in over my head.’ I am now!”

Another reason for her success is her New York-based partner, Enrico Marone-Cinzano, who has a



Sewing techniques familiar to quilters such as reverse appliqué, overdyeing, and running stitch are employed by the home-based stitchers of Project Alabama. The design specifies double thread, with knot and thread ends showing—something a quilter would never allow on her quilts!

deep background in business, primarily in real estate and banking. Project Alabama is a new type of venture for him, but he is not deterred.

“Doubt is such a big part of the creative process,” believes Enrico, echoing Natalie’s belief that she has been “in over her head” in everything she’s undertaken. And although there is room for doubt in the creative process, there is no room at all for sloppy business practices, the partners believe. Project Alabama is organized as an LLC (limited liability corporation), is licensed in the state of Alabama, and is a registered trademark.

“This business hasn’t just happened,” Natalie makes clear. “It rep-

resents a serious financial commitment and ‘sweat equity’ of about twenty hours a day, seven days a week.” She indicates that she spent as much as a year raising the capital she would need to get the business started, and that part of the planning for the company’s success was the ensuring that it would be adequately funded during its start-up period.

The third reason that Project Alabama has found success so soon is the publicity it has garnered. For its premiere season, the partners commissioned a Project Alabama catalog that explained the premise of the company and showed examples of the garments that were available. They sent the 400 catalogs to major



Natalie Chanin's sense of humor about her rural Alabama roots comes through in many of her designs for her clothing line known as Project Alabama.

stores in Europe and America, and showed the collection of 200 pieces at the Chelsea Hotel during Fashion Week in New York. The first stores to pick up the line were Barney's in New York, Brown's in London, and L'Eclaireur in Paris. The acceptance by these prestigious stores attracted the attention of the magazines, and repeated mentions in the leading fashion and trade journals followed (and continue).

During the introductory year, a video and original CD named "Stitch" made by the Project Alabama management was circulated to the fashion media. The video is about time-honored quilting traditions and the women who have continued to uphold those traditions through the years, even when "quilting wasn't cool," as it is today.

"It feels good to be giving back to Lauderdale County," says Natalie (whose nickname in fash-

ion circles is "Alabama"). "I never really thought [the sewing project] would be this important, when it began. Now I'm being asked to go to other counties, not only in this state, but elsewhere, and teach how to do this, how to make a cooperative of untapped labor for home-based work.

"Unfortunately, it is just not possible for me to take time away from my obligations to my company long enough to put together a talk," Natalie says with real regret. "I look forward to having the time

someday to be able to help other people establish something like this, but I've got my hands full right now. Part of our mission statement for our company is the moving from this one community towards embracing multiple communities with additional products and projects."

Although Natalie Chanin, through her natural humility and the common-sense approach she takes toward what she does, would probably play down the fact that it's her own special creativity that fuels the demand for her product, there's no denying that her approach is fresh, new, and innovative, and is the reason her clothes have caused such a stir. And the timing is apparently perfect.

A great idea at the right time—a sure formula for success. But Natalie's not taking any chances.

"As good as all this is, we try very hard not to get carried away. . .

you make mistakes when you do that. We want to be careful, to make a strong foundation, so we'll be here ten years from now."



The back of a garment is often as lavishly embellished as is the front.

Sunshine Huff (aka Mary Elizabeth Johnson) is an experienced writer who concentrates on textiles and material culture. Her most recent books are Mississippi Quilts (University Press of Mississippi, 2001) and Quilt Inspirations from Africa (with Kaye England; Quilt Digest Press, 2000). She is currently researching Alabama Quilts and invites anyone who has Alabama quilts that were made before 1950 to get in touch with her through the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

Elephants and Butterflies: *The Sculpture of Bruce Larsen*

by Georgine Clarke

The sculpture is a six-foot elephant

standing on an inverted rusty bathtub with wheels. It has been selected as Best of Show in the 11th annual edition of *Art with a Southern Drawl*, a juried exhibition organized by The University of

Mobile and showcasing 89 pieces by artists from throughout the South. Works have been selected by W. Steve Rucker, associate professor of art at Loyola University in New Orleans. The underlying theme is Southern wit and wisdom, reflecting regional sensibility and diversity.

Beyond Repair is the title of this mixed-media pachyderm dominating the exhibition space. It is the creation of Fairhope artist Bruce Larsen and is considered found-object art, constructed of such diverse elements as raku clay, discarded auto parts, cow bones and rusty metal. The tusks are driftwood found on the beach.

Why is this found-object art so connected to the South? Larsen answers, with a straight face, "I think we have more junk here." As to its success, art jurors have commented about his work: "I liked the creative way he used the materials. Wonderfully different" and "It embodies the almost legendary skill of Southern hands and materials involved in assemblage of sculpture." Current exhibition juror Rucker is quoted in the *Mobile Register*, "...make an elephant out of an old '47 Ford fender and the lyricism



Elephant Sculpture "Beyond Repair," by Bruce Larsen.

Photo by Kent Stocker

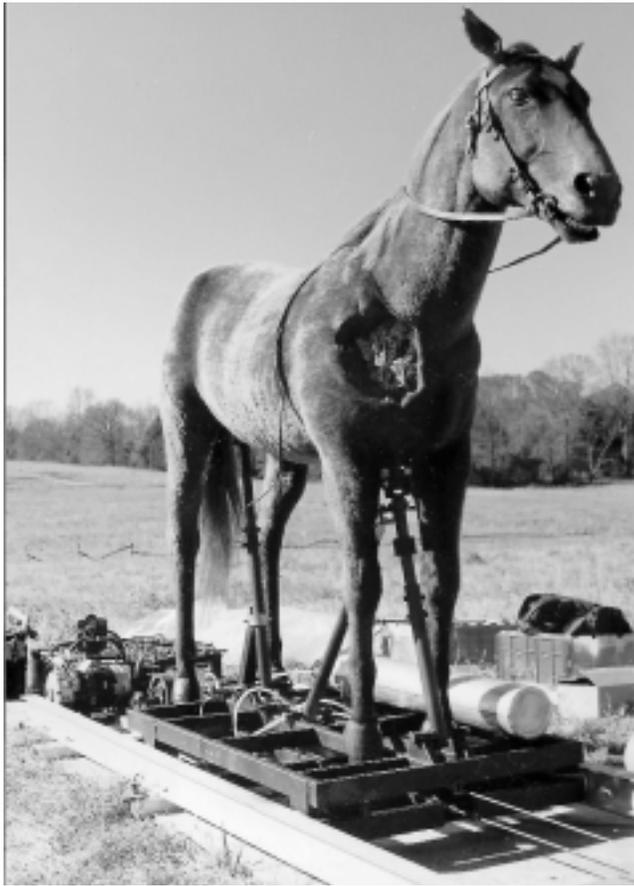
of the (tail) being a chain, it's just incredible. It's jazz."

Larsen's elephant is making a statement about universal environmental concerns. He says, "I guess the inspiration was just the plight of elephants and the shrinking gene pool." The sculpture has been constructed using salvaged materi-

als, but the animal itself may soon be gone.

Bruce Larsen graduated in 1986 with a Bachelor of Fine Art Degree from Auburn University. The creation of a costume out of duct tape led to a prize, which then led to spending the next 13 years in Atlanta doing freelance work designing and constructing special effects, props, animatronics and animation. He has worked with music groups Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, and Widespread Panic. He has helped with television productions (Stephen King's *The Stand*) and commercials. And he is considered one of the best in creating mechanical animals for special effects in the film industry. He describes them as "realistic horses that can do stunts." Those were his horses in *The Patriot*.

Now he wants to develop his career as an artist. He and his family have returned to Alabama, despite all those calls from film producers for his help with complicated projects. Fairhope is a good place for children to live. He's constructing a house in stages—a pagoda shape up on stilts, with a section of glass brick. He thinks it looks like a



The Patriot horse traveled down a 100-foot track with a stunt man. Both horse and rider are thrown violently to the ground.

The sculpture, titled *Transformation*, is designed to be as monumental, interactive piece featuring a butterfly with a 20 foot wingspan. Of the title, Tew says, "Communities change and evolve. The butterfly is an apt symbol of that."

Joe Schenk, director of the museum added, "We are thrilled to have one of our corporate citizens give back—especially to the arts community. We are particularly pleased that the commission also acknowledges our ongoing support of local artists." Of the size he says, "The scale is needed at the museum's new grand entry. The piece will fit well with other sculpture in the outdoor environment on the lake."

In Larsen's signature style, the butterfly will be built of found objects, including glass, rusted metal and a boat motor. A lever system will allow visitors to move the wings. Tew comments, "His work is unlike anything you've

space ship at night. (As a side note, he is also NAUI Scuba and United States Parachute Association certified and is a member of the United States Hang-Gliding Association.)

A sculpture by Bruce Larsen will be a signature piece at the front entrance of the newly expanded Mobile Museum of Art, set for dedication in early September 2002. The piece has been commissioned by CIBA Specialty Chemicals, producers of products for the automotive and plastics industry. Scott Tew, Director of Community Affairs for CIBA, said, "There are three special events happening now in Mobile: The City's Tricentennial, the re-opening of the Museum, and a celebration of CIBA's 50 years in Alabama. CIBA wanted to give something back to the community in this celebration.



Black Knight: A mechanical horse operates on a 24-volt direct current motor.

seen. You wonder, ‘How did he think of that?’”

Allen Smith, an engineer, an artist, and recipient of a Design Fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts, is collaborating with Bruce on the sculpture. He says, “I’m very respectful of him as an artist and as a person. We encourage each other as artists. We energize ourselves by bouncing off ideas.”

Smith has designed the 30-foot steel blade of grass which will support the butterfly. Of the process, he says it’s easy. “You make a sketch on a napkin, digitize it and (Mobile’s) Bender Shipyard’s multi-million dollar equipment cuts it out of a sheet of steel.” Of the engineering needed to produce a piece of such scale, especially with interactive components and potential hurricane winds, he says that it is not a problem. “The technology and knowledge of things such as the dynamic loads of wind have been known for a long time. The challenge is to do something artistically .”

How do you create such a piece? Smith says you “build it in your head first. You think about the particulars of motion in a butterfly—you think about so many things.” But most important, you have parents who “didn’t tell him he couldn’t do what he wanted to do.” Bruce Larsen says, “I’d be lost without art. It’s the only thing I can do.” ■

Georgine Clarke is Visual Arts Program Director for the Alabama State Council on the Arts and director of the Alabama Artists Gallery.



Through *The* *Remembered* *Gate*

by Jay Lamar

It is not news that Southerners have traditionally had a certain obsession with place. The questions “where are you from?” and “who are your people?” are obligatory in conversation between any two Southerners meeting, especially when their paths cross outside their region. In fact, the relationship of place and self has given generations of Southern artists, notably writers, a wealth of creative material.

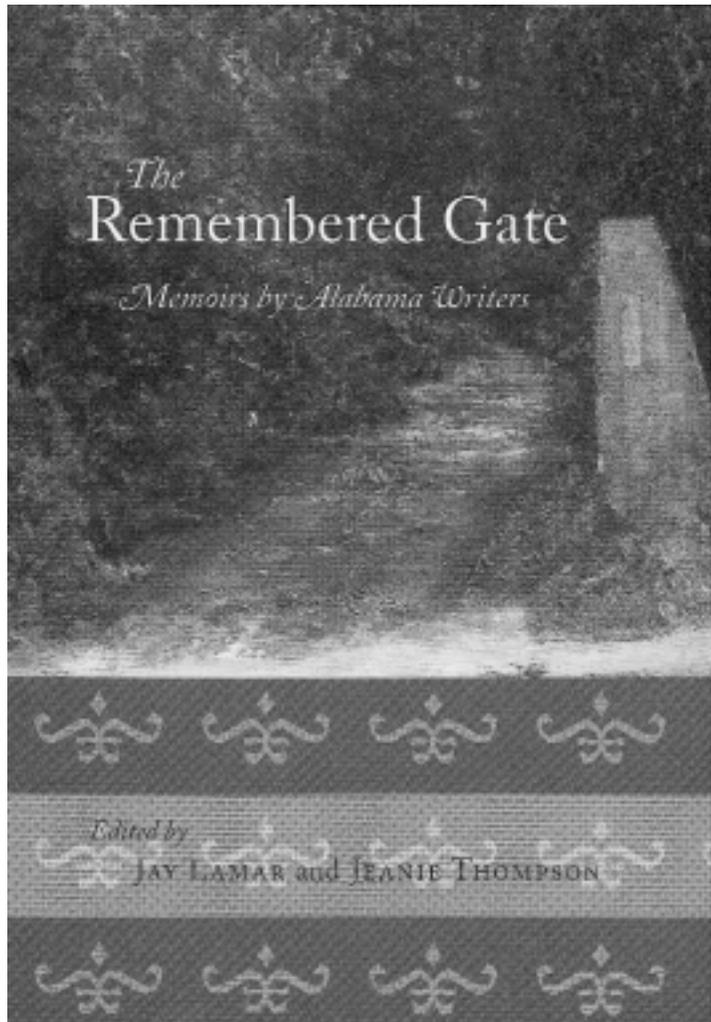
Poet Jeanie Thompson and I wondered whether, in this age of television and global communities, place still had much influence on a writer and whether it was to the good or the ill. With support from the Alabama Corporate Foundation for Children and the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation, we asked more than twenty nationally and internationally recognized authors who have strong connections to our state to write an essay in response to the question: “How did growing up in Alabama, or spending formative years here, shape you as a writer?”

In the nineteen essay memoirs that we received, the Alabama writers of *The Remembered Gate* sit at dinner tables, attend funerals, crawl around in attics or in the dry dust beneath porches, paddle on snake-infested ponds, and stare out the back windows of un-airconditioned Chevys as they search for their younger selves. What they discover about the role

of place in their lives is as varied as the writers themselves.

For Alabama poet laureate, award-winning novelist, and short story writer Helen Norris, *place* means *land*. In early spring on the east Montgomery farm where she grew up, “there were fields of wild dewberries and blackberries, which we loved to pick, then red and yellow plums, muscadines, and persimmons in the fall. Deep in the woods was a wide place where a sloe tree dropped its bluish-tipped fruit to float in the water. I tell you this because it was extremely important to me....Everything I’ve ever written has in some sense come out of those woods.”

Poet Andrew Glaze notes that it was not the life of the mind, so much as the activity of industry and business, that characterized the Depression-era Birmingham he knew as a child. He writes,



“
*I shall always
be sentimental
about Alabama.*

*It used to be my
home.*”

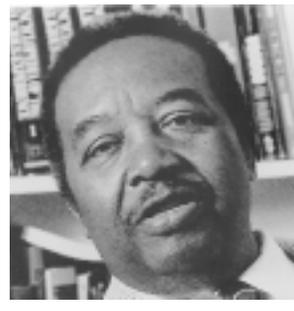
*C. Eric Lincoln,
“Coming Through the Fire”*



Patricia Foster



Nancy Kincaid



C. Eric Lincoln



Fanny Flagg



Mary Ward Brown



James Haskins



Andrew Glaze



Helen Norris

people were doing real things...on the slope of Red Mountain...a wagon driver would be fiercely lashing his poor mules, trying to make them struggle a load of coal up the curve in the nearly vertical driveway at 2811 Niazuma Avenue. At Acipco, a workman was repairing a pipe mould and dusting it just before a giant bucket arrived along the rail line and poured it full of molten iron. Mme Jeanne Youngblood was chain-smoking halfway up Highland Avenue to the summit from Jones Valley on Altamont Road, teaching French verbs to a bored high school girl, while an Italian lady in a tiny delicatessen at 15th Avenue just off 21st Street was dipping vanilla cones in chocolate.

Then, at age 14, Glaze read Emily Dickinson: "In an almost indefinable way, the direction of my life [took] some sort of bend, or perhaps *curlicue* would be a better word." However separate from the "real" activity of a bustling city the young Glaze felt, the textures, odors, and thumping blood of early Birmingham have found their way into his work and given it an extraordinary concreteness and tangibility. (Glaze's new collection, *Remembering Thunder*, will be published this year by NewSouth Books of Montgomery.)

Place, of course, is not separable from the people who inhabit it, and human beings fascinated Nanci Kincaid as a child. They were mysterious—and full of creativity:

You...knew everyone had secrets—and some of them were not much and others were pretty bad. You also knew that nobody was going to ever tell you the absolute truth about anything that ever happened in this life—and you came to count on this and appreciate it. Instead people told things like they wished they were or thought they ought to be. It takes a little imagination to be a good Alabamian.

Kincaid, whose books include *Pretending the Bed Is a Raft* (Algonquin, 1997), *Balls* (Delta, 1999), and the just-published *Verbena* (Algonquin, 2002), asserts that the fact that "in Alabama a good story is always better respected than the actual truth" has "always worked out pretty well for her." Actually, she writes, "the truth gets so far-fetched sometimes that it is downright impossible to take it seriously. So stories lurk all around, most of them with some shred of fact in them and then embellished by the hungry-hearted people telling them."

Those "shreds of fact," and the truths that shape our lives, are often discovered in vivid memories. Bill Cobb, author of more than a half-dozen novels as well as many short stories and



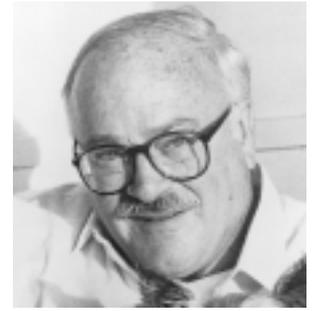
Robert Inman



Judith Hillman Patterson



Albert Murray



Wayne Greenhaw

plays, remembers his paternal grandfather shortly before he died,

over at the old Cobb home place in Sumter County, sitting in a chair carried outside on a sunny Sunday noon at a family reunion and barbecue, on the lawn near the pear orchard. The black women from the place were standing behind the long table laden with barbecue cooked all night and potato salad and cole slaw, swishing the flies away with willow branches. My Grandfather Cobb, sitting in the chair wearing a vested suit, started to cry. The tears rolled down his cheeks; I stood flatfooted and watched him. I knew he was going to die. Maybe that was the first time I had realized that people die. I was touched by some sorrow so deep that I knew I could never understand it. I ran away to play with all the other cousins.

For Phyllis Perry, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist whose novel *Stigmata* is set in Macon County, Alabama, place means family and its winding strains of connection and loss. "Life is motion. Love in human form moves away... then comes back together. And the beloved ones return to you, but not as the people you knew before. They are not the untouchable, the all-powerful, the almost supernatural beings you remember." According

to Perry, her writing grew out of a powerful curiosity: "Even as a child, I wondered about everything... that was inside of every person, dead or alive, who survived it all, whether I knew them or not. I wanted to know things about them that they didn't know themselves."

While it is true that that anyone from anywhere has stories to tell on which place impinges, place in all its particulars is important. The title of *The Remembered Gate* comes from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," the last of his *Four Quartets*. It concerns, among many things, coming back to a place and knowing it for the first time. The essays of *The Remembered Gate* are Alabama stories, and they tell us about our place.

At the same time they tell about the human experience in general. The route to the universal is through the individual and the local, as Albert Murray makes so clear in the final essay of *The Remembered Gate*. "This is pretty down-home stuff," he writes, "but beneath the surface of your old down-home stomping ground... is the common ground of mankind in general." In writing about experience and all the happiness and pain it contains, we tease the riddle of place into something more, where it can be expressed, explored, and transformed. As Murray says, "It is the process of extension, elaboration, and refinement that creates the work of art."

That's precisely what the authors of *The Remembered Gate* essays accomplish. In their essays, and in their poems, novels, plays, and short stories, they draw on their



Andrew Hudgins



Phyllis Alesia Perry



Rodney Jones



William Cobb



Frye Gaillard



Sena Jeter Naslund



Charles Gaines

Alabama roots to make art. Taken together, the essays of *The Remembered Gate* do not make up the whole picture of Alabama, or of writing, or of how artists are influenced by place, but they do point to how rich and vital the connection of place and self can be. They give us some pieces of the puzzle, and they create something larger than their sum. As Phyllis Perry notes, “I belong to many places both ‘real’ and imagined, both tangible and mythic. But sometimes when I close my eyes in the quiet, I’m in Perote, as close as I come to being somewhere called home. And it’s from home—good or bad—that all stories come.” ■

Jay Lamar is the associate director of the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities and co-editor with Jeanie Thompson, executive director of the Alabama Writers’ Forum, of The Remembered Gate: Memoirs by Alabama Writers, published this year by the University of Alabama Press.



Jay Lamar and Jeanie Thompson

Photo of Patricia Foster by Jon Van Allen; photo of Mary Ward Brown by Jerry Siegel; photo of James Haskins by Bill Horne; photo of Andrew Glaze by Adrian Glaze; photo of Helen Norris by Robertson Photography; photo of Wayne Greenhaw by Sally Greenhaw; photo of Andrew Hudgins by Joanna Eldredge Morrissey; photo of Phyllis Alesia Perry by M. Shawn Dowdell; photo of Rodney Jones by Gloria Jones; photo of William Cobb by Amy Cunliffe; photo of Frye Gaillard by Amy Rogers; photo of Sena Jeter Naslund by Sigrid Estrada; photo of Charles Gaines by Michael Marzelli; photo of Judith Hillman Patterson by Dennis Cauchon; photo of Albert Murray by Jeanie Thompson; photo of Jeanie Thompson and Jay Lamar by Katie Lamar Smitha.

ALABAMA: *The Country to Film In*

by Brian Kurlander



I love going to the movies. There is nothing quite like sitting in a theater filled with people, equipped with hot buttered popcorn, a box of Dots and a cold Coke, to transport you completely into the stories on the screen.

Being wrapped up in a good story is nothing strange to Alabamians, who live with stories like no one else. To prove my point, I challenge you to stop in any town in Alabama and ask for directions. You'll get two stories and three ways to get from point A to point B, and the experience will give you an



Sidewalk Moving Picture director, Eric Jambor (left) with Kent Osborne, actor, writer and star of Sidewalk's 2000 "Best Feature," Dropping Out.

appreciation for the art of storytelling that comes so naturally to Alabamians.

The climate for filmmaking in Alabama is currently at its optimum, primarily due to the leadership shown by Governor Don Siegelman and Alabama First Lady Lori Allen Siegelman. The governor's vision for

economic development has created nearly 70,000 jobs for Alabamians, and the first lady's commitment to the arts has educated Alabama school children about the benefits of artistic self-expression. The film industry is truly a combination of economic development and the arts, and we are fortunate to have leadership in this state that complements the goal of growing the film industry.

Hollywood is no longer the center of the world when it comes to filmmaking. The rise of digital technology has made it easier for home-grown filmmakers to walk out their front door and document the stories they grew up with in their own backyards. It has been a pleasure for me to meet some of these people here in Alabama who are putting their stories into film.

For **Scott Lumpkin**, film is an expression, a state of mind, and a state of being. Scott is a film producer. He crunches the numbers for the budget. He hires the crew and the vendors. He assembles all the pieces of the puzzle and holds them together until the film is sold and screened in theaters. His business is the business of making films, which he has made into an art form itself.

"As an artist in the production aspect of a project, I can assemble the best team possible to tell the story. I can utilize the resources I grew up around, and bring people who inspire me to tell that story. When in production, I like to think of myself as the man who brings the marble to the sculptor. I see the figure within, and the director chisels it out with the actors and locations I provide."

Scott grew up outside Fairhope, received his undergraduate degree from Troy State University in Communication Arts, and attended USC Film School in Los Angeles. After a successful year of working on feature films in California, he returned to Alabama to work with David Prior at Southern Star studios in Mobile. Scott has since opened his own production company, Lumpkin and Associates. His credits in Alabama and elsewhere include *The Insider*, *Monster's Ball*, *Love Liza*, *The Badge*, *Hometown Legend*, *Roper & Goodie* and many others. Bringing films to Alabama is more than a job for Scott Lumpkin; it is his passion, and he takes pride in being an active participant in growing the film industry in his home state.

"Nothing hurts me more than when I hear of one of our stories being told elsewhere.

These are *our* stories, *our* places, *our* resources and *our* people. I want to have them portrayed on screen on our

own terms, and show the world the Alabama that I know and love.”

Erik Jambor is director of the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in

Birmingham. He has been working as an editor, cutting television commercials, since graduating from Florida State University’s School of Motion Picture, Television and Recording Arts in 1993. In 1995, recognizing the need to get back to producing his own work, Erik produced a 35mm short film called *Gamalost*, starring former MTV Vee Jay Alan Hunter. The film screened at international film festivals in 1996, and eventually won the gold award for best original dramatic short at World Fest Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. But it would be the film festivals themselves that would soon be the focus of Jambor’s attention.

“The best part of taking *Gamalost* around the festival circuit was that I got to be part of the film festival experience and to see a lot of really great films. The first big film festival I attended was in Seattle, and I came back to Birmingham raving about all the great films I’d seen. Of course, most of the films I really enjoyed never came to Alabama—most of them stayed on the film festival circuit, and there was nothing here at the time for them to come to.”

It was eventually Birmingham film-



A street view during the Sidewalk Film Festival

maker Wayne Franklin who came up with the idea that would grow into the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival. Franklin, his wife Kelli McCall, and Jambor set about making the dream a reality.

“Wayne’s idea was that we should do a film festival that was basically the City Stages of film. You’d buy a day pass or a weekend pass and spend your time watching films or hanging out, eating, drinking, listening to music, while deciding what films to see next. It very quickly became about creating a community environment, where attendees could mix and mingle with filmmakers. And with the Alabama Theatre, the Carver Theatre, and the McWane IMAX Dome all within one block of each other, we had the perfect location for the sort of festival we’d envisioned.”

Alan Hunter and filmmaker Michele Forman were recruited to the cause, and brainstorming in 1997 turned into planning in 1998. In November of that year, the group founded the Alabama Moving Image Association, Inc., a non-profit group that would run the festival and other related projects, all to further the organization’s mission to inspire,

support and encourage films and filmmaking in Alabama.

In addition to bringing new films to a new audience, Sidewalk also provides a tremendous resource for Alabama

filmmakers. Industry leaders like Sony Electronics and Eastman Kodak attend the festival and hold special technology demonstrations and workshops.

Filmmakers participate in panel discussions, share ideas, and exchange information. Perhaps most importantly, the event has encouraged Alabama filmmakers to make more films.

“Each year, we receive more and more films from Alabama filmmakers, and each year, the films that they submit get better and better. At Sidewalk 2001, almost one-third of the 100 films screened at the festival were by Alabama filmmakers or had some sort of Alabama connection.”

What do you get when you put together two childhood friends from Dothan, a bucket of fresh mullet and a digital video camera? You get a film called *Mullet Men*, written and produced by **Harris Mendheim** and starring his childhood friend **Andy Stuckey**. The two are part of Possum Den Productions, which, along with Charlie Hubbard, *Mullet Men’s* editor, has produced the “story of all stories” about the world-famous (or perhaps infamous) FloraBama mullet toss. The annual event is held at the FloraBama

Alabama is not like filming in just one state; it's like filming in all 50 states.

Lounge in Orange Beach, Alabama/ Perdido Key, Florida and attracts colorful characters from throughout the United States who compete for the prestigious honor of determining who can throw a fish the farthest.

Shooting at the FloraBama was an undertaking, especially with no budget. Owner Joe Gilchrist was kind enough to give all the guys access passes, with the only stipulation being that if someone asked not to be filmed, they would not film them. Fortunately for Andy and Harris, the FloraBama creates a backdrop for a short film that is already garnering rave reviews.

"The movie has to be groundbreaking in its cinematography, as there is no place in the world with the atmosphere of the FloraBama, especially during the now world-famous mullet toss. We shot 60 hours of tape on DV cams in Alabama, Florida and New York. The outcome is a 60-minute documentary about one man's quest to become a world fish-throwing champion."

Possum Den Productions is made up of six people who had a vision to make a movie and fulfilled that vision by purchasing cameras, editing equipment and using it to tell a humorous, possibly, compelling story. *Mullet Men* debuted to a full audience at the Dothan Opera House on December 22, 2001. It has since played in sold out houses in Atlanta, Birmingham, Nashville and New York.

There are only a few places in our society today where we gather as a

community and share the stories that bind us together. The movies provide us with a place to laugh, cry, be startled, and contemplate our own lives and the world that we share with others. Alabama is filled with great stories and, better yet, great storytellers. The vast diversity of landscapes in Alabama provides filmmakers with an amazing array of location options. Alabama is not like filming in just one state; it's like filming in all 50 states. All of these factors have led to the coining of a phrase to promote Alabama and the Alabama Film Office: "Alabama, The Country To Film In." ■

Brian Kurlander is the director of the Alabama Film office. His goal is to merge the art of storytelling with technology, which is playing a major roll in how stories are told and films are currently being made. He gratefully acknowledges contributions to this article by Scott Lumpkin, Erik Jambor and Andy Stuckey.



Andy Stuckey practicing his mullet throw in Central Park. The annual mullet toss takes place at the FloraBama in Orange Beach, Alabama/Perdido Key, Florida.

A Happy Marriage Text and Tune

by Phillip Ratliff

For a composer, setting a text can be difficult enterprise, involving a series of concessions and compromises between two powerful expressive forces, words and music. To successfully unite the two, the composer must act as something of a marriage counselor, finessing the two often conflicting parties toward agreement, persuading them to bend in service of a larger concern—a harmonious union.

Samford University composition professor James Jensen was recently given opportunity to address the thorny technical issue of text setting in his 2001 composition entitled “Three Poems by Theodore Haddin.”

“I’ve touched on the song writer’s most vexing question—how to accomplish a natural, mostly syllabic, setting of a text that still has musical interest,” Jensen says. “It’s all too easy to go off on a flight of musical fancy that obscures the text, and when that happens you might as well ask your singer/narrator to randomly open a phone book and start reciting names and numbers because, at this point, text has become meaningless.”

“Three Poems” received its premiere at Alabama Modern Collaborations, one of a series of concerts presented by the Birmingham Art Music Alliance. For his texts, Jensen turned to the Birmingham resident and former UAB English professor. All three of Haddin’s contributions “Snakes Again,” “Housing Authority,” and “Benefits Office” concern the dehumanizing effects of modern-day commercial and bureaucratic excesses.

Setting Haddin’s poetry to music was not without its challenges. Haddin’s lower case, unpunctuated texts offer few cues as to how his poems could be structured musically. Haddin describes his poetry as “a kind of free verse that employs natural rhythms and natural rhymes.” Although he might write the occasional sonnet, he usually avoids such formal approaches to rhyme scheme and rhythmic pattern. “I like to plunge right into the poem,” he says, referring to his process of letting the poem’s spontaneous elements control its outcome.

Jensen’s music, in contrast, relies on more conventional designs. His complicated, jazzy, rhythms require notational precision; he frequently uses intricate counter-

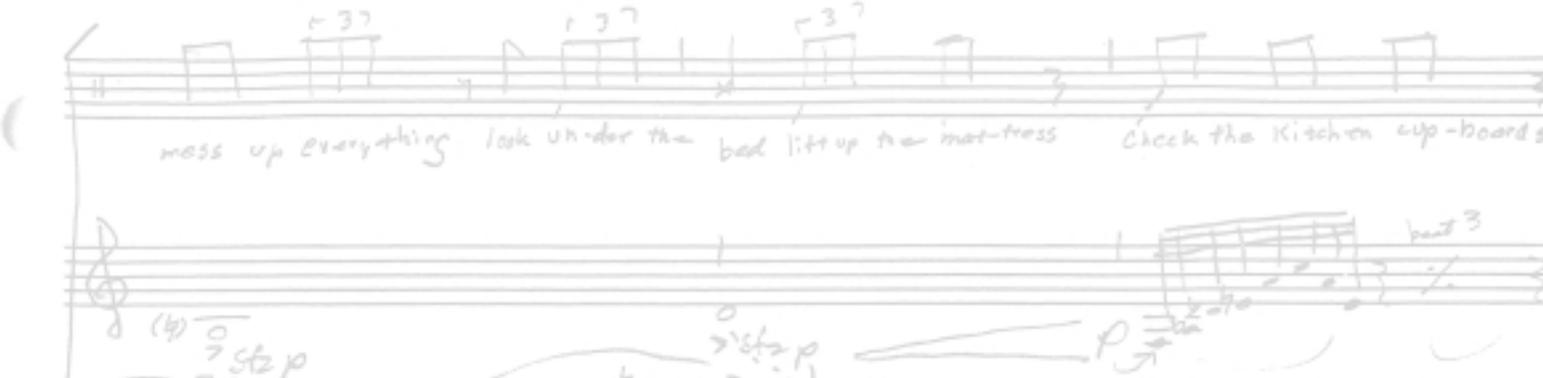
point; and his forms are more traditional. Jensen struggled to find the musical means to allow for the natural flow of Haddin’s text while remaining true to his stricter approach. Jensen eventually decided to use a narrator rather than a singer. “Ted’s poem was merely an outline and it really didn’t matter if we were beat-by-beat together as long as we arrived at certain pre-determined marks together,” he explains.

Haddin was pleased with the results. “Jim was able to arrange themes in such a way that the parts of the poems that needed to be emphasized got the emphasis,” Haddin says. More importantly, Jensen discovered the meaning behind the words. Perhaps because, Jensen suggests, Haddin’s poems spoke directly to Jensen’s concerns as a citizen of a sprawling city like Birmingham.

“Snakes Again,” which is about one man’s frustrated response to a developer, in particular struck a “note of consonance” with Jensen, reminding him of his own reaction to a construction project west of the Samford campus. Prior to the development, Jensen recalled, the area was a forest, without even a road through it. “The developers spent a couple of years leveling and scraping away every living thing, flora and fauna, leveling it out, and finally covering it with asphalt,” Jensen says. “When they were finished, they named it ‘Wildwood.’ Many of us at Samford refer to it as ‘Paved Wood.’”

Jensen credits Haddin with helping him find this dynamic connection between music and text. Jensen sees Haddin’s poems as inherently musical, a trait Jensen attributes to Haddin’s earlier training as a violinist. Haddin recalls visiting Jensen’s office at Samford and seeing copies of his poems tacked to the walls, suggesting that Jensen’s approach was one of total immersion in his poetry. Jensen eventually asked Haddin to record his own recitation of his poems. By repeatedly listening to a recording of Haddin’s spoken version, Jensen discovered the shape and rhythmic life of the text and contoured the ebb and flow of his music accordingly.

In fact, Haddin’s reading had become such an integral part of his understanding of the music, Jensen asked him to



join the group of musicians, which included clarinetist Lori Neprud-Ardovino, pianist Adam Bowles, and bassist Abraham Becker, as the narrator in the premiere performance. For Haddin, reciting his poetry in time with three other performers, despite his experience as a violinist, was a new experience. "I had to come in at the right time, exit at the right time," Haddin says. "It was very different from reading by myself. When you read yourself you are in control—you can hesitate, give some space. When reading to music you have to conform to the composition."

The idea for Alabama Modern Collaborations took shape in an unlikely place—Nabeel's, a Mediterranean restaurant in the Birmingham suburb of Homewood. According to Birmingham Art Music Alliance (BAMA) Programming Committee chair Monroe Golden, the meeting was born out of a common frustration among BAMA members over recent performances, which seemed long and artistically uneven, more of a hodgepodge of pieces than a series of unified concerts. Many recent compositions submitted for performance to BAMA, a group formed to present the newest of the new in contemporary music, were, in fact, a little dusty.

Collaborations with local poets and writers seemed an ideal solution. By pairing composers and poets, BAMA was assured a supply of brand-new compositions unified by an overarching theme. And with a deadline looming on the horizon, a composer's tendency toward long-windedness would be regulated.

BAMA considered one other benefit from collaborating with poets' larger audiences. Like composers, poets have their regular fans. But contemporary poetry is, by and large, a much more audience-friendly enterprise. There is something egalitarian about its free rhythms, modern-day references, and often very vernacular form of English.

Golden and the programming committee presented the idea to the other members of Birmingham Art Music Alliance, who embraced it enthusiastically. BAMA president Craig Hultgren then applied for an Alabama State Council on the Arts project assistance grant, and the organization eventually received \$3500 in funding; Alabama Modern

Collaborations was born.

Jensen's and Haddin's collaboration was one of several presented in the April concert at Samford University. Other composer/poet teams included Donald Ashworth/Russell Helms, Joe L. Alexander/Alan May, Monroe Golden/Sandra Sprayberry, and Charles Mason/Leisha Hultgren/David Ulrich.

Both Jensen and Haddin gained something from the Alabama Modern Collaborations project. For Jensen, collaborating with a living poet during the compositional process has been an invaluable learning experience. "One of the most satisfying aspects of the collaboration was having the poet actually participate as a part of the musical ensemble," Jensen said.

Haddin, too, learned something from the experience: "It assured me that composers can be very good readers of poetry. It was most surprising and pleasing to find this out." ■

Cullman native Phillip Ratliff currently resides in Birmingham, where he teaches music and humanities at Miles College. A graduate of the University of Montevallo, he went on to complete the Master of Music and Doctorate of Musical Arts in Composition at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music.

In 1998, Ratliff was commissioned by Taavo Virkhaus and the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra to compose I-65 Rocket in celebration of the 45th Anniversary of that city's space industry. Other commissions include Travolta, written for the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and 49, for the University of Texas New Music Ensemble.

Active as a writer, Ratliff regularly contributes reviews and features to the Birmingham News, the Birmingham Weekly, and the Oxford American, and edits the journal Living Music.

Housing Authority

Poem by: Theodore Haddin



chicago police housing authority
open up inspection men come in
we step back they go for the dresser
pull out drawers mess up everything
look under the bed lift up the mattress
check the kitchen cupboards examine
the waterpipes lift the commode lid
what they doing here only a woman
ninety years me a married man children
they don't know our names my wife says oh
oh again what did we do no warrant they go
next door do the same a mother her children
look like a gang they look like cocaine
nothing there stockings thrown all around
mr vincent lane director says he wants
to make surprise inspections all through
chicago he never heard of martin luther king
but he knows the nazis he strides like hess
through ghettos sneaky sweet swastika death
open up he says shuts a door on self respect

Snakes Again

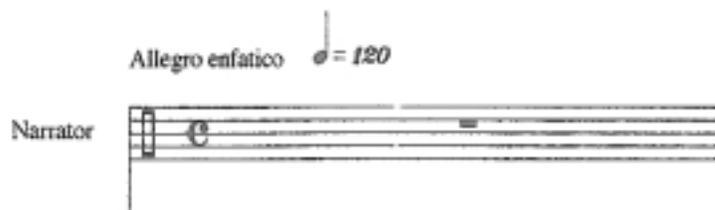
Poem by: Theodore Haddin



Dear mister city man
here are these snakes
I've caught in baskets
black king gray rat copperhead
all those that escaped vibrations
of your great bulldozer
Here I give them back
to dwell as best they can
around your big house
on your land devoid of trees
and bushes and long grass
and rock piles by the creek
Here have them man
since she wont seek the outside
tell your wife to stay inside
but watch the rafters
before she gets in bed
with you at night

Benefits Office

Poem by: Theodore Haddin



She spoke so I couldn't say
I was trying to tell her
I was worth a quarter
of a million dead
but I couldn't get to
I was worth
and then not even
a quarter
finally I told her
I was dead.

The Southern Writers' Project at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival

CREATING NEW WORKS FOR THE STAGE *Southern Style*

by Gwen Orel

photography by
Phil Scarsbrook

Sometimes people wonder how a nice girl from New Jersey came to be in Montgomery, Alabama. When I say I came here to work in the theatre, sometimes people look puzzled: surely the center for theatre is New York?

Well, not necessarily. For some time, much of the best theatre in the country has originated in regional theatres nationwide—particularly when it comes to new plays. Producing a non-musical play in New York is so risky that only organizations like the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, supported by foundations and loyal audiences, can take on the nurturing of new work. Next time you see a play in New York, look carefully at the title page—nearly every play you see will have been developed, and often produced, somewhere else in the country first.

Montgomery may not be a huge theatre center, like Minneapolis, Chicago or San Francisco, but it is becoming one of the foremost centers of play development in the country. I came here to be the literary manager for ASF and to run the Southern Writers' Project.

Playwrights who participate in Southern Writers' Project workshops—sometimes coming from New York and Los Angeles—are torn between wanting to spread the word and wanting to keep this “secret” to themselves. But as literary manager, I have no trouble at all in bragging about this wonderful program!

Founded in 1991 by Artistic Director Kent Thompson, the Southern Writers' Project of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has a mission to provide for the growth of a new voice for Southern writers and artists; to encourage new works dealing with Southern issues and topics including those that emphasize African-American experiences; and to create theatre that speaks in a special way to ASF's unique and racially diverse audiences. It is a way, Thompson explains, to locate the work we do in our own community.

“There was nothing in our programming to reflect the region that created this theatre. However presumptuous [the idea might be], I decided ASF should try to create the next Southern classic for the stage. I believed that our Southern stories would inform and enhance our Shakespeare stories and vice versa. Who could not experience *King Lear* with greater depth after seeing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?” he asks.

Since its origin, SWP has produced 13 plays—12 of which were world premieres—and workshopped dozens of others.

Southern Writers' Project productions have included *Grover* (1993) by the late Randy Hall, about *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Grover Hall and his battles with the Ku Klux Klan; *Lizard* (1994), by Birmingham writer Dennis L. Covington, adapted from his novel of the



Greta Lambert, *Shiloh Rules*, 2002.



Caroline Clay & Sonja Lanzener, *Shiloh Rules*, 2002.

same name, later produced in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta; *Fair and Tender Ladies*, adapted from Lee Smith's novel by Eric Schmiedl with music and lyrics by Tommy Goldsmith, Tom House, and Karren Pell; Horton Foote's *Vernon Early*, which received national media attention and glowing reviews; *Lurleen*, Barbara Lebow's story of the life of Lurleen Wallace, *A Night in Tunisia* by Regina Taylor, *The Negro of Peter The Great* by Carlyle Brown, and *Shiloh Rules* by Doris Baizley.

But the plays produced each year are just the fruit of SWP—there is a blooming, healthy, new tree of play development growing in Alabama—through our SWP workshops. In these workshops, we foster not only plays, but playwrights as well. In the course of one single week, we rehearse five or six plays with professional actors, directors, and dramaturgs (a dramaturg is something like an editor; he/she works with the writer on story structure, suggesting changes and helping with research), culminating in script-in-hand readings in front of an audience. A discussion usually follows. All of the Southern Writers' Project world premieres have come out of these workshops. Some of the plays are commissioned by ASF; some come to us



Greta Lambert in 1998's *Fair and Tender Ladies*

via agents or the “stacks”—unsolicited manuscripts, sent by the playwrights themselves.

Sometimes we invite writers who are young in their career (not always the same as young in years, though that is often the case) to give them a chance to hear their plays read by professional actors, so we can get to know the writers better and support them as they find their voices, even if we don't think a particular play would be right for us.

Mobile native Elyzabeth Wilder is a good example of an Alabama playwright whose career is being watched and cultivated by the Southern Writers' Project. We expect big things from her! Actually, we expect big things from all the writers who come to SWP—but Elyzabeth's long history makes us particularly proud.

Elyzabeth first came to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival as a “lost boy” in 1993's production of *Peter Pan*, directed by Kent Thompson. She participated in the Young Playwrights' Project workshops in 1997. (Instead of the Young Playwrights' Project, ASF now sponsors a Young Southern Writers' Project competition, open to Alabama teens. Winners will be announced in mid-June.)

As a member of the “Youngbloods” at New York's Ensemble Studio Theatre (E.S.T.)—a group of young writers under 30) Elyzabeth is already generating interest nationwide. Although she has yet to see a professional production of one of her full-length plays, her one-act, *The First Day of Hunting Season*, was produced at E.S.T. this winter and praised by the

New York Times! Elyzabeth has received a full fellowship to NYU's Dramatic Writing Program, and she starts this fall. (This prestigious program incorporates playwriting, screenwriting, and writing for television.)

"To a certain extent my work with a Southern theme is definitely received on a different level when seen by a Southern audience," she says. "Southern audiences appreciate elements of the work that

audiences outside of the South might miss."

"In New York, people ask you 'what are you?' 'cause so many people are first and second-generation Americans. I say, 'I'm southern.' That's how I view myself before anything else—we have to embrace our history if we're going to learn from it."

Elyzabeth has participated in

SWP workshop weeks twice: once in January 2001, with her script *The Theory of Relativity*; again in October 2001, as part of our "New Voices" week, to workshop her play, *In Ocean Springs*. In the October workshops, she worked with MFA acting candidates on improvised scenes from her scripts. Rather than having a rehearsed reading in front of an audience, she read excerpts from her play at our playwrights' panel, and used the time here as a writing retreat, with intensive feedback from ASF artistic staff.

"*In Ocean Springs* wasn't as complete as *The Theory of Relativity*—it wasn't ready for an audience yet," Elyzabeth explains. "The time spent discussing the piece was as important as hearing it. The improvisations opened up new



Greta Lambert & Johnny Lee Davenport in The Negro Of Peter The Great, 2001



Philip Pleasants & Johnny Lee Davenport in The Negro Of Peter The Great, 2001.



Stuart Culpepper, Grover, 1994.

areas of the work that I hadn't thought of yet, and gave me a new perspective on the backstory of the characters. From that came new ideas on where the characters could go.

"SWP provides me with a safe home to nurture my work. I never feel like my work is being compared to anyone else's—which can happen in writers'

groups. We just focus on the work."

Since her workshop of *In Ocean Springs* with us, Elyzabeth has had a reading of it in New York that incorporated changes made here, including some rewriting and restructuring. Audience reaction was good, and recently Elyzabeth got a call from Actors' Theatre of Louisville requesting a copy. "Having SWP on my resume' with that piece has opened doors—it has allowed the work to be read by people who might not have otherwise."

As literary manager, I host the workshop weeks—and one of the things I love most about SWP is the way it brings theatre artists together. Theatre is inherently a collaborative art—but writing is intrinsically lonely. When we do a workshop week with five or six readings, we create a microcosm of the theatre world across America—a country so wide that people can admire one another's work for years and never have a chance to meet.

In January 2001, we began including playwrights' panels in the schedule of the reading week. At these panels, playwrights read a three-to-five minute excerpt from their work, discuss the play's origins, and take questions. This breaks the ice with the writers and audiences, and encourages cross-collaboration, as demonstrated in our post-show discussions and conversations in the hall. I know things are going well when actors, directors and playwrights beg me for the permanent contact sheets that include the address, phone number and e-mail for everyone in the SWP company.



Lester Purry and Shawana Kemp in 1996's *Thunder Knocking On The Door*.

Elyzabeth agrees. “I am inspired by other writers I have met there. To be among such writers as my peers Keith Josef Adkins, Kia Corthron, and Doris Baizley—is so wonderful. The wide variety of playwrights that SWP embraces, and the way the program has grown, is really impressive! I’ve made wonderful friends there.”

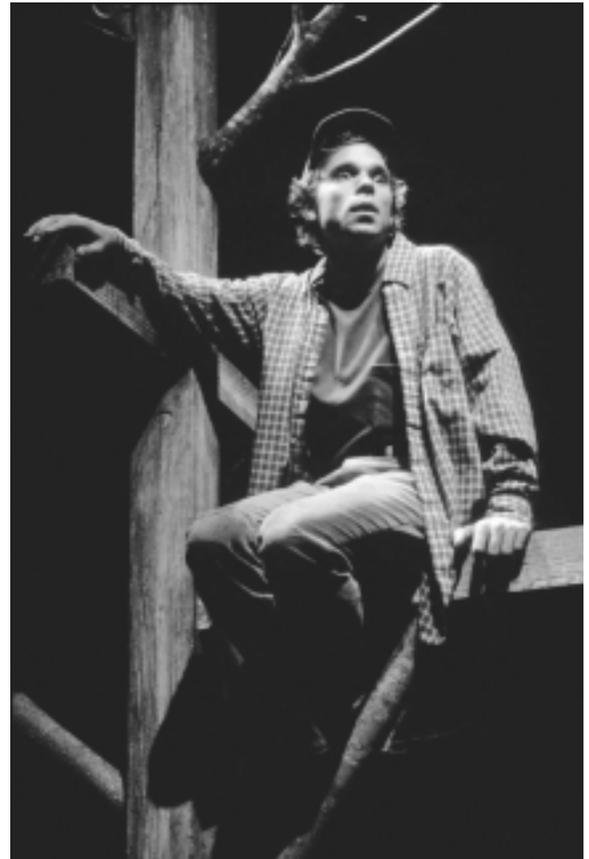
Elyzabeth is right—SWP surely is expanding! We have received a generous grant from Vesta Insurance Group, Inc., with which we will inaugurate the Vesta Festival of the Southern Writers’ Project (Vesta Fest), our first new play festival, in February 2003. This will consist of two SWP world premieres which will run in repertory in the 225-seat Octagon—Kia Corthron’s ASF commission, *The Venus de Milo is Armed*, and a play by Mississippi schoolteacher and writer Linda Byrd Kilian, *Aaronville Dawning*. The two plays express the wide variety of SWP productions—a cutting edge sociopolitical comedy from Kia, and an authentic voice of Southern storytelling from Linda.

The way in which we found these two writers are another example of the variety and breadth of SWP: we came across Kia Corthron’s work when visiting the A.S.K., Los Angeles’ New Play weekend. Kia’s play about girl gangs, *Breath, Boom!*, has since been produced in London, New York and Atlanta. While we knew that play wasn’t right for us, her voice was so impressive that we signed her up for a commission; she wrote a play for us that is a realistic depiction of a surreal situation—a world in which land-

mines go off in America. Her play takes place in an unnamed town in the South, and, despite the subject matter, is a wild, comic ride that is, tragically, very timely. What do you lose when you lose a limb? And is terror ever a valid way to make a point?

We workshopped Kia’s play in June 2001 (A production of another of her plays, *Force Continuum*, in New York, had kept her from coming to the workshop in January).

“I had never been to the Deep South before the workshop last June,” Kia says. “It’s so exciting for me to be doing this play in the Cradle of the Civil Rights Movement! As an African-American woman, I am eager to work in the town that laid the ground so that I could [work and write]. There are many theatres that attain grant money, via which they commission writers who write plays that are not immediately, and often enough, never, produced. Many theatres commission edgy, risky writers, then reserve their seasons for the safe tried-and-true. Alabama Shakespeare Festival, which in the past has produced such bold, brilliant writers as Carlyle Brown and Regina Taylor, is obviously not an institution that simply plays it safe. Such courage is lacking in many centers of theatre—including my city of residence, New York.”



Norbert Butz, *Lizard*, 1995.



Isiah Whitlock Jr. and Jamahl Marsh in 2000’s *A Lesson Before Dying*.



Kent Thompson and Alan Harrison at a SWP workshop

We found Linda Byrd Kilian when I served as a panelist for the Mississippi State Council on the Arts. Every other year, they award grants in playwriting and in screenwriting. Ms. Kilian, a seventh-grade schoolteacher and grandmother, submitted her *Aaronville Dawning*, and subsequently joined us in October for our New Voices workshop. Her play presents Lemy Babin Caldwell, an elderly woman who, while preparing funeral food for her friend Beasley, tells the audience about the people of Aaronville, Mississippi—its sinners and its saints—while keeping her own secret, secret. It is Linda's first play—but not her last, if SWP has anything to say about it!

Both Linda and Elyzabeth credit their Southern upbringing for their desire to write plays. "Southerners are prone to storytelling—if we forget the ending, we make it up!" says Linda. "I have always wanted to write—it comes from being Southern and hearing all this stuff, and the fact that Southerners tell people things—they don't show them, they tell them—from the time we're little kids. I have always kept my ears open. I wonder if it can be done anywhere else. Sometimes I think that living in the South is like living on another planet."

Elyzabeth says, "My earliest memories are of cocktail hours, sitting at the feet of my great-grandmother and grandmother and her sisters, telling stories and drinking bourbon. They would eat extra-sharp cracker barrel cheese and peanuts—this happened every day at 5:00 p.m., religiously. They told stories about growing up in the Depression, going through the war years, raising children—my grandmother has an amazing ability to turn fact into fiction. Or vice versa, depending on how you look at it. It became almost a competition between the sisters to see who could tell the best story. It's something you can't really go to school to learn. I live in New York, but Alabama will always be home."

For Linda, coming to the Southern Writers' Project has changed her life. "Being included in the Southern Writers' Project workshop was wonderful, because for the first time I got a chance to work with professionals. I didn't think there would be so much interest in my work! I got a feeling of confidence I would never have had if I had not gone through the workshop. It was even better than I expected—I thought it would be a hum-drum thing, that they'd read it, ho-hum, and I'd go home. Everyone was so professional, and so respectful of the work. The other playwrights were so accepting. As a first-time playwright, this was the only venue I had to get professional advice on things. Having ASF decide to do it is a dream come true!"

Is it so surprising, then, that this Jersey girl would jump at the chance to be

here? There are not many theatres like this one, so committed to nurturing and supporting artists, and so nurtured and loved by their community. The love Alabamians have for this institution is manifest in so many ways—not only in the food volunteers bring to our receptions, but in the people who attend our plays, send us their comments, come to our “Theatre in the Mind” lectures, and support our resident actors, designers and students.

Alabama is proud of ASF—and it is this pride that makes what we do so rewarding. ■

Gwen Orel is the literary manager at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, where she runs the Southern Writers’ Project. She spent 1999 in Prague on a grant from the Mellon founda-



Playwrights Elyzabeth Wilder, Linda Byrd Kilian, and Javon Johnson.

tion, researching her dissertation on “English-language Theatre in Post-Communist Prague.” Her adaptation of Kafka’s The Trial was produced in Prague and in Dublin. Recent published work includes articles/entries in Theatreforum and the Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance (2003).



Gwen Orel with playwrights Eric Schmiedl, Kelley Pounders, Elyzabeth Wilder, and Linda Byrd Kilian.

Exhibition Schedule

Alabama Artists Gallery

May 9—July 5, 2002

“New Work—Emerging Alabama Artists”

Emily A. Bodner, Huntsville, painting

Richard Curtis, Huntsville, performance art

Julie J. Hankins, Montevallo, installation of ceramic stoneware

Samantha Rinehart Taylor, Marion, drawing and painting

July 11—August 29, 2002

“From Tradition—Baskets of Alabama & Quilts by 2001 National Heritage Award Fellow, Mozelle Benson”

Organized by the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Alabama Folklife Association

September 8—November 8, 2002

“Giving Voice to Vision: Alabama Design”

Exhibit featuring design in Alabama

November 15—January 2003

“Alabama Masters”

ASCA Fellowship Recipients 2002

The Alabama Artists Gallery, located at the offices of the Alabama State Council on the Arts in the RSA Tower in downtown Montgomery, provides an on-going showcase of the work of Alabama artists in all media.