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MOVIES

Haunted by His Father's Murder at the Hands of a Racist

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SAN JOSE, Calif. - Amelia Ray was 22 when she sat in a darkened theater, watching her father, Carl Ray, perform his autobiographical one-man show, "A Killing in Choctaw." Only then did she discover that he had witnessed the murder of his father decades before, killed because Carl had refused to say "sir" to a white man.

After a scene in which Mr. Ray begs his dead father to rise and see him go to college, a friend who was at the theater that night in 1999 leaned over and whispered: "Did you know about this?" Ms. Ray shook her head no. She didn't even think it was odd, she explained recently in an interview. "I guess I'd grown accustomed to the silence."



At first it was only on stage that Mr. Ray, now 60, could give voice to his experience. Recently that story has been made into a documentary by Chike C. Nwoffiah, a filmmaker and executive director of the Oriki Theater, a nonprofit community theater here in Silicon Valley. Called "A Killing in Choctaw: The Power of Forgiveness," after the Alabama county where Mr. Ray was born, the film had its premiere last month at the Montgomery Theater here. Explaining why he was moved to make the documentary, Mr. Nwoffiah said, "It's an important enough story that it needs to get out there."

That story began in Butler, Ala., on Sept. 6, 1962, when Carl was 18 and preparing to leave for the Tuskegee Institute to major in engineering. With his bags packed, he and a cousin shot off firecrackers near his house. The echoing booms attracted their neighbor, Bill Carlisle, who pulled up in his pickup and blasted the boys with angry questions. After Carl replied with a series of yeses and nos, Mr. Carlisle asked if Carl didn't know that he should say "yes, sir" and "no, sir" to a white man.

"No," Carl said.

Mr. Carlisle knocked him to the ground and pulled out a knife. "I was looking straight in his eyes," Mr. Ray says in the film, remembering the moment. "Just before he plunged the knife in my throat, he stopped." Mr. Carlisle rose, Mr. Ray recalled, returned to his truck and drove away.

Carl went home, and with his father, George, waited. "I knew Bill was coming. My daddy knew Bill was coming," Mr. Ray says in the documentary.

George Ray moved his family next door to a relative's house, and then pushed the television set onto the porch. Father and son sat outside watching "Douglas Edwards With the News" while they waited.

Carl Ray says he remembers the crunch of the truck tires as Mr. Carlisle arrived. After angry words and a scuffle, Mr. Carlisle cocked his .45 automatic.

In a segment of his show, which is part of the documentary, Carl Ray slowly re-enacts the events: "Each time the bullet hit, Daddy's body would flinch. The dust particles from his clothes began to float up and mix with the smoke from the gun barrel. Bill continued to fire. Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Daddy falls in slow motion. He takes his last breath."

"When I saw his body at the church," Mr. Ray says in the film, "reality set in. When they took him outside and put him in the ground, I began a nightmare that lasted a lifetime."

For the documentary Mr. Ray returned to the Alabama courthouse where Mr. Carlisle was tried.

"It was like a one-day circus come to town," Mr. Ray recalls as he sits on the witness stand retelling what happened some four decades earlier. Joe Thompson, Mr. Carlisle's defense attorney, accused Carl Ray of murdering his father. Mr. Ray impersonates Mr. Thompson: "You killed your daddy because you don't know how to talk to white people! If you knew how to talk to white people he would still be alive. Isn't that so?"

"No, sir," Mr. Ray said.

"Damn uppity negra," Mr. Thompson said to the judge and jury.

At intervals Mr. Nwoffiah was so overcome that the camera trembles. "As a director," he said in an interview, "you wonder at what point do you stop? Mr. Ray always said: 'Keep going. We have to get through this.' "

Mr. Ray recalled blacks sitting upstairs in the courthouse crying as if the trial were a funeral, while downstairs whites laughed.

The jury found Mr. Carlisle guilty of first-degree manslaughter and sentenced him to nine years in prison. Although the state has no record of Mr. Carlisle's having served any time, Mr. Ray's oldest brother, Lindsey, and Mike Dale, a former Butler resident who knew the Carlisle family, said he had heard that Mr. Carlisle served less than a year.

Mr. Ray said that he has always felt responsible for his father's death, and worried that his siblings blamed him as well. He suffered from severe depression and nightmares. For years he told no one what had happened. He felt "a silent scream," he said.

His wife, Brenda Hampton-Ray, learned of her husband's history 10 years ago, when she came across an old clipping about the killing.

"He had this facade for so many years," Ms. Hampton-Ray says in the documentary. "We really didn't know who the real husband and real father was."

Despite his troubles, Mr. Ray graduated from Tuskegee, then began working as an engineer at the Lockheed Corporation in California. Then this haunted man, who as a child had used humor to ward off bullies, decided to become a comedian.

The documentary blends portions of his show with Mr. Ray's commentary and interviews with others. At one point a split screen shows a thinner Mr. Ray darting onstage, wowing a Southern California crowd with his comedy. On the other half of the screen, Mr. Ray's old, sad eyes barely move: "You walk back off that stage," he says, "you walk back into that prison where all the demons are waiting for you."

Mr. Ray began finding his voice in 1998 when an exhibition of civil rights photos from the Smithsonian Institution were displayed at the San Jose Museum of Art, and an official there who knew Mr. Ray was a comedian from Alabama asked him to speak about the civil rights era there.

"She didn't really know what she was getting," Mr. Ray said recently. Among those who listened was Tommy J. Fulcher Jr., president of Economic and Social Opportunities Inc., a nonprofit organization in the area. Mr. Fulcher told Mr. Ray that his story was more moving than all the famous photos from the civil rights exhibition. He made Mr. Ray an offer: Mr. Fulcher would back a one-man play written and acted by Mr. Ray. A year later, Mr. Ray was telling his story onstage.

Since then Mr. Ray has traveled the country, performing his play before college audiences and in community theaters. Wanting to make a documentary, he searched for the right filmmaker. He contacted Mr. Nwoffiah after seeing his 2000 documentary about a black hospital, "A Jewel in History." With no financing, Mr. Ray raised \$150,000 himself. Amelia, one of his five children, wrote the accompanying music and designed the Web site, www.carlraye.com. Mr. Nwoffiah said he plans to submit "A Killing in Choctaw" to film festivals and show it at community theaters and colleges. No New York showings have been scheduled yet.

Theaters in Choctaw County probably won't be too eager to show it though, said Tommy Campbell, the editor and publisher of The Choctaw Sun, who knows both the Carlisle and Ray families. "This is not the South of the 1960's anymore," he said. Residents "would just like to let it alone," he said.

Mr. Ray wanted to expose what happened 42 years ago, but he was not quite ready to watch the documentary. During the premiere he stood silently in the back of the theater, seeing snippets of his life, before fleeing outside.

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