

Capturing Characters on Stage for the College and Community: An Interview with Playwright Rex Stephenson

by Tina L. Hanlon

Most people probably think of theatres and libraries as being worlds apart, but Ferrum College's Sale Theatre and Stanley Library are next door to each other. Thanks to recent renovations on campus, only a few steps will take you from the library's back door into the theatre, across an attractive patio that theatre-goers enjoy during summer plays. Many of those plays have been written by R. Rex Stephenson since he founded the Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre in 1978. Even during years when getting inside the library required more steps, there was plenty of traffic between the two buildings. Drama majors writing and performing their own senior plays over the years had no excuses for shirking on their research or writing skills, with librarians and tutors next door in the library. Among many dramatic requests for library resources, the most unusual one was probably a trash can borrowed once for a prop. Librarian George Loveland had fun putting a bar code on it, checking it out, and later sending an overdue notice to get the trash can back from the theatre. Faculty members, librarians, visiting actors, and local children who come together to perform in summer plays pop into the library to read a magazine, use the Internet, or do a little background research during short breaks from arduous labor in the theatre. And

Stephenson's remarkable career as a playwright, director, and actor often takes him to libraries and archives for research and performances.

Soon after he came to Ferrum to teach drama in 1973, Stephenson began adapting Appalachian Jack Tales, traditional folktales about

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the magical adventures of a country boy named Jack. In his seventies in the late 1970s, the renowned storyteller and folklore collector Richard Chase visited Ferrum as a consultant for Stephenson's Jack Tale Players. Chase's books *The Jack Tales* and *Grandfather Tales* have made mountain folktales from Virginia and North Carolina popular throughout North America since the 1940s. "Wicked John and the Devil," about a mean blacksmith who tricks the devil, is a tale that Chase told orally to Stephenson so that he could dramatize it without permissions expenses, and it is still a perennial favorite with the Jack

Tale Players. Since 1999 Stephenson has also adapted tales with female heroes, such as "Ashpet," "Catskins," and my favorite, "Mutsmag," about a spunky girl who defeats a giant and a witch. Stephenson's own roles in "Mutsmag" range from playing a door and a giant's ugly daughter to a one-eyed robber and the king of Virginia.

In December 2005 the Jack Tale Players gave their thirtieth anniversary performance at Callaway Elementary School, in the same auditorium as their first public show in 1975. They have performed more than 3,000 times in 35 states and England, at schools, veterans' hospitals, parks, churches, conferences, and community centers. One public performance this summer kicked off a library summer reading program, "Tales, Legends, and Lore," at the Spencer-Penn Center in Spencer, Virginia.

In 2007 the Southeastern Theatre Conference honored Stephenson with one of the most prestigious awards in the field of child drama,

Tina L. Hanlon is associate professor of English at Ferrum College and the Hollins University Summer Graduate Program in Children's Literature. She is a coeditor of Crosscurrents of Children's Literature: An Anthology of Texts and Criticism (2006) and director of the website AppLit. Contact her at thanlon@ferrum.edu.



the Sara Spencer Award. Nellie McCaslin, who remained a mentor after supervising his doctoral work at New York University in the 1980s, dedicated the eighth edition of her creative drama textbook to Stephenson in 2005 just before her death ended a distinguished career as a dramatist, scholar, and professor. She called Stephenson's summer plays for families "a unique and highly successful example of intergenerational theatre," praising the Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre for the professional and social benefits of productions in which local and professional actors, young interns, teenagers, and children work together, drawing in parents, tourists, and others to enjoy the plays.¹ This collaboration is also led by Executive Director Jody D. Brown, a retired English professor and excellent actress. Emily Rose Tucker, who started as a summer college intern, is musical director, composer, and often a lead performer in BRDT plays.

Many characters that Stephen-

son brings to life from the pages of folklore archives, historical documents, and classic literature find themselves back on library shelves in his published plays. His folktales appear in six published scripts and several textbooks and journals. Eighteen other published plays are based on historical events, from Galileo's scientific discoveries to a trial that freed a woman from slavery in Franklin County, as well as Bible stories and literature by Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, and Mark Twain. Stephenson has also portrayed the American master of fiction and social satire for many years in *An Evening with Mark Twain*.² One of the first times Stephenson asked me to serve as a script consultant, for *The Jungle Book*, he ignored my protestations that I was not a Kipling expert, so I went off to the library to read more about Kipling. Subsequent research has taken me to Dickens' homes in southeastern England and to the OED to figure out whether words

such as "Dad" and "teenager" were anachronistic in nineteenth-century dialogue. When I found myself on local television with Stephenson and McCaslin in 2000, the interviewer was amazed to hear how many variations of "Snow White" we had studied. Thus I learned firsthand that these plays involve varied types of research and offer interesting possibilities for educational projects. I prepared study guides for several of Stephenson's plays published by Pat Whitton Forrest at New Plays for Children in Charlottesville (<http://www.newplaysforchildren.com/index.cfm>), who likes to integrate teaching materials with the scripts she publishes. I enjoyed digging deeper into the playwright's views on drama and research for this interview.

VL *Were libraries important to you when you were young in rural Indiana, before you became a playwright in Virginia?*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF DALTON

The Jack Tale Players perform Rex Stephenson's adaptation of "Quare Jack" at the Rocky Mount Farmers' Market, July 25, 2008. Rex points things out to John Isner, a Ferrum graduate and successful actor.



research she goes to the Internet. But libraries are important for kids; they are safe, and generally filled with people who enjoy reading and helping people find what they're looking for.

VL *I know you started dramatizing Appalachian folktales in 1975 after your daughter Janice brought home a copy of Richard Chase's *The Jack Tales* from school. I've heard that many other storytellers and writers were inspired by hearing a librarian or teacher read these same folktales during their childhood. Do you encounter many people who know the folktales from books?*

RRS It is amazing the number of people that will come up to me after a show and say, "My third grade teacher read us these stories when I was in elementary school." I remember once we were playing at a festival in Newport News and a lady showed me her copy of *The Jack Tales*. She had asked for it for Christmas because the copy in the library was always checked out. I'm also astonished at the number of people I've met that had heard Richard Chase tell stories. And all that have talked to me speak of

RRS Because I was a commuter at college, when I had free time, I went to the library; and the more I was there, the more I discovered things. My biggest discovery during my freshman year was the reference room. I found answers to every question I have ever had in there. As a matter of fact, the reference librarian got to know me by my first name. I didn't make very good grades my freshman year, but I learned a lot.

I like a library. I like the smells of a library. I like the feeling of

being in a place where they have everything I want. There's something about a book—you hold it and you look at the words and you read it out loud. Then you go to the bibliography and you get to find more books. Sometimes when I'm in a library I just pull out a book at random and read a couple of paragraphs to see if the author is an ordinary writer or a wordsmith. I worry that kids today don't appreciate a library. It's gotten to be a generational thing. When my daughter Juliet thinks of doing

their encounter with Chase almost reverently.³ I can say honestly that Chase was the finest storyteller I ever heard.

VL *How important has research been since you began writing your own plays?*

RRS When I first started dramatizing the Jack Tales, our library got me all kinds of books on interlibrary loan on folktales and Appalachian history. Back then, Appalachian Studies wasn't "in." I was over there every other week bugging them. They were good about getting every book or article I was looking for. Luckily for me later, I met Richard Chase, Cratis Williams, and members of the Hicks family of North Carolina storytellers. This combination of hearing the stories and listening to the background of the tales plus the scholarly research included in books by Chase and Williams gave me an appreciation I try to capture when I dramatize a folktale. When I went to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, that's when I discovered the work of earlier Appalachian storytellers and collectors, such as Jane Gentry and Isobel Gordon Carter. Raymond Sloan was another excellent collector of folktales and folk songs in Franklin County. He told me stories, explained how the Virginia Writers' Project worked when he collected for the WPA, and gave me names of people to interview.

Another fortuitous thing that happened was just pure dumb luck. I was tracing back some of Chase's informants and I went to Wise County in search of Dicey Adams, who had told Chase a number of Jack Tales. She was the widow of James Taylor Adams, who had headed the Virginia Writers' Project in southwestern Virginia. When I talked to Dicey, she told me that everything they had on folklore had been given to a local library. At the library, I found the

"lost" folklore collection that had not been published when the Virginia Writers' Project closed in 1942. It was thousands of pages packed away in boxes, with all the WPA collectors' original stories from southwestern Virginia. Most of the folktales that I have dramatized came from this collection.

VL *And the same James Taylor Adams Collection is now archived in Ferrum's Blue Ridge Institute. The links between the oral tradition, archives, and books are fascinating. I've read that librarians spread*

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the art of telling traditional folktales to children around America and Britain in the early twentieth century. In Chase's books and many other collections by storytellers, the authors encourage readers to tell the tales out loud in their own way after reading them. In your story theatre performances with the Jack Tale Players, I've heard you encourage audiences to read the tales in books by Richard Chase or the Grimm Brothers. How do you view the relationship between your adaptations and stories in books?

RRS At every show we try to do a little plug for reading. After we tell the audience about the books, librarians sometimes say, "We don't have it but we'll get it before you come back next time." I just want kids to discover reading and Mr. Chase's books. Once I had a rare invitation to say a few words to the audience when I attended a production of my adaptation of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. I used this opportunity to encourage them all to read Twain's

version. To me, an adaptation of a classic story should just be the springboard that encourages children to go back to the original source.

VL *Tell me about your summer performances at the Franklin County Library. I've seen the meeting room there packed with enthusiastic audiences of all ages at Jack Tale shows.*

RRS We used to perform at the Rocky Mount Community and Hospitality Center in the old train station, too, or the courthouse, but since the new library opened a few years ago, we have performed there. The meeting room is not an ideal space for a performance, but to do a show surrounded by books—it is a great environment. Getting to know and working with a good children's librarian is important. Franklin County has one of the best in Joyce Tuckloff. One of the good things about performing at the library is that children and parents come to the shows together, or children and grandparents, unlike our shows in the schools.

VL *I agree with what you've said about the joys of libraries and books. But librarians also make valuable electronic resources available to us these days. When my website AppLit (<http://www.ferrum.edu/applit/>) was created during a workshop sponsored by our library and the Appalachian College Association in 2000, you ran over to the library several times bringing me material for AppLit's first bibliographies and study guides. How has the Internet contributed to your work as a dramatist?*

RRS There are things on the Internet that would not get wide distribution if it were not for sites like AppLit. The example that comes to mind is the story Raymond Sloan told me, "Jack and His Lump of Silver." I had published his story in a small journal, and I

doubt if many people read it there. However, when it went on *AppLit*, I know a number of people read the story. For example, my sister-in-law, Sharon Stephenson, heard a storyteller in Indiana tell “Jack and His Lump of Silver.” She said, “My brother-in-law tells the same story.” And the storyteller said, “Yes, I got it on a website from a little college in Virginia.” Whenever we do kids’ shows, we like to provide teachers with background information. Now we just recommend the website, and not only do teachers use it, but we’ve also discovered their students go to it.

VL *Writing your adaptations of classic literature requires getting to know the books very well. Sometimes you even include the author as a character in the frame story of a play. What kinds of research are involved in writing these plays?*

RRS Most of the classics I have dramatized came out of my youth. They were the books I read and reread as a child, like *Treasure Island*, or books like *Alice in Wonderland* that I read to my girls. Then, because I love them so much, to try to stay objective a little bit, I’ll usually go over to Stanley Library and spend an afternoon with criticism and biography so I can see what other people have said about the story, or just sometimes to try to get in the author’s head, to find out why he wrote this story. I try to tell the same story the author told.

My research on Robert Louis Stevenson led to the frame story about him and his stepson in my play *Treasure Island*. I discovered that he wrote the book chapter by chapter as a gift for his stepson when he didn’t have money for anything else. It seemed like a logical frame, more appealing to modern children because the relationship was through a divorce and remarriage. They got along so well that they make good role models for families today.

VL *How do you research your plays based on historical events?*

RRS In most of the history plays I’ve written, I’ve had historians that provided a lot of guidance for me. Historians by their very nature always send you to the primary sources. What constantly amazes me is how many primary sources you can find in a library. When I was writing a play about Cecil Sharp, the English folklorist who collected folk songs in the South and came through Franklin County in 1918, I think I

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spent three days in London doing research at the Cecil Sharp House (home of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and the English Folk Dance and Song Society). After that, the play wrote itself.

My most recent endeavor, *When the Lights Go On Again*, is a musical revue about World War II. I not only wanted it to encompass the music of the era, but I also wanted the story line to be about something. Now, I grew up in a time when people talked about the war a lot. Most of my relatives had been in the service or had worked in defense plants, and I remember always listening to their stories. And oftentimes the name Ernie Pyle came up. One day in my high school library I ran across a copy of his book *Brave Men*. I’ve been an Ernie Pyle fan ever since. I think part of the reason that I almost memorized some of Pyle’s newspaper articles was so that I could be included in the conversations with

my relatives about the war. It was just logical for me to go back and include excerpts from his wartime articles in my musical revue.

VL *Your family plays have been supported by the Nellie McCaslin Endowment each summer since your mentor at New York University died in 2005. Tell me about the special relationship between Nellie McCaslin and Ferrum College.*

RRS Dr. McCaslin was always a strong proponent of intergenerational theatre—in other words, blending performers of a variety of ages into one production—so it was not really difficult for me to talk her into becoming one of our actresses in some summer plays. She was, I think, eighty-four when she did her first play for me in 1999. The youngest member of that cast was seven, so it was truly cast in a manner that she had long advocated.

We were very fortunate at Ferrum that Dr. McCaslin left her personal library to Stanley Library. She had all the primary books from the early history of children’s theatre and creative drama plus so many modern reference works and plays. Because Dr. McCaslin’s tenure at NYU was so long, whenever one of her students would publish something, they would automatically send her a copy. If you add into that the fact that she probably knew personally most practitioners of creative drama in the United States and England, and they would also send her books, it was indeed quite an impressive and unique collection.

VL *I admire the way you capture the language and rhythms of the original text when you adapt classic works of literature. Book lovers often criticize dramatic adaptations or films because they don’t include everything in the book. How do you handle this problem when adapting a novel?*

RRS *Little Women: A Musical* is the play we are working on now and it's been the most difficult adaptation I've done since *Alice in Wonderland* (1995). I think this is true because everything in Louisa May Alcott's book is so interrelated; everything depends on something else and the characters' relationships are so complex—yet they seem so very, very simple. Deciding what to put into the play to capture the spirit of the book in an hour and a half is challenging. In addition, there is her use of language; it is very honest and yet it is emotional and detailed and creates pictures. When I read the book, I had these images in my head of how it would look on the stage. I also asked readers of the novel which parts they most remembered. For most playwrights, their job is to *create* a character; in an adaptation you have to *capture* a character. Alcott's words are also melodic and we used some of them in the songs. Some things just can't be said any better than her exact words. For example, there's no bet-

ter way to write about Beth's long illness than to describe it as a tide going out. Shakespeare couldn't have done better. What's always in the back of my head, especially during this play, is that on opening night, Louisa May Alcott has a seat right next to mine.

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Jo March's last line at the end of Stephenson's Little Women illustrates the continuing relationship between his plays and the books he adapts. Telling the audience a little about her future, Jo says, "If you want to find out more about what happens next in my life, you can read Little Men."

Notes

1. Nellie McCaslin, "The Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre: A Recipe for Success," *Stage of the Art*, Winter 2002, <http://www.ferrum.edu/news/ArchivePreMay02/brdtstageart.htm>; Nellie McCaslin, *Creative Drama in the Classroom and Beyond*, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2005).

2. Tina L. Hanlon, comp., "Dramas and Tales by R. Rex Stephenson," *AppLit: Resources for Readers and Teachers of Appalachian Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Ferrum College, <http://www.ferrum.edu/applit/bibs/bibrex.htm>. Provides details about publications.

3. Sandy Shuckett, "Regarding Richard Chase: Two Memorable Meetings," *California Libraries*, August 2004, http://www.cla-net.org/events/newsletter/aug04_RichardChase.php. Coincidentally, while this article was being written, an email from California author Kerry Madden brought us a copy of librarian Sandy Shuckett's article about meeting Chase. **VL**



The Blue Ridge Dinner Theatre performs Rex Stephenson's recent play, Little Women: A Musical.