

Mapleton, 1873. A virtual melting pot of people and cultures. The Grange exists, as do the Masons, but no churches, yet, and not much law. A pair of boots are stolen from the local store by a giant of a man from Peel, New Brunswick. A double axe murder of the Presque Isle Sheriff and his Deputy ensues (along with the burning of their bodies), and finally, a mob performs a lynching – the only recorded hanging without fair trial to occur in New England History.

It's "The Legend of Jim Cullen," and it's about to premiere as a fully staged, two act production, filled with original music.

Chapman, 1969. A young boy is left to spend a rainy afternoon with his grandmother. To pass the hours, she pulls down a bundle of old newspaper clippings and reveals this seemingly unbelievable story to a wide eyed youngster, with a vivid imagination. For Griff Braley, a 9 year old Mapleton native, a seed was planted on that day. Forty-four years later, it's harvest time.

In 1973, Braley moved to Midcoast Maine with his parents, Norris and Janet Braley, and their family. He graduated from Medomak Valley High School, in 1979. There, he developed an intense love for theater, moving on to major in Theater at Bates College.

Today, Braley is the Artistic Director of Heartwood Regional Theater Company, a 10 year old non-profit company based in Damariscotta. In this role, he has directed more than 70 productions. Not only does he enjoy the autonomy of selecting and directing each season of productions, but occasionally, he has the enviable opportunity to write and direct his own show.

Premiering July 19th is Braley's version of this Northern Maine Legend, passed down through generations. And yes, there is a personal connection. The murders and fire occurred near his grandfather's potato farm in Chapman, and his great great grandfather plays a redemptive role in the story.

Dena Winslow, of Presque Isle, authored a book (her Ph. D. dissertation) on this legend, "They Lynched Jim Cullen," from which Braley has drawn much of the storyline for his play. Often quoted throughout her book is Braley's grandfather, Elra Buck, of Chapman.

In addition, the playwright spent time in the UMPI archives, while researching both the story and the historical period. His interests include religious, social, political and literary connections to the 1873 legend.

The seeds of many aspects of the play are rooted in childhood memories, including early morning walks on a snowy paper route, working on the Buck potato farm, and the cold beautiful winters of his youth.

“The Legend of Jim Cullen” is a summertime combo package of history, music and storytelling, and it embodies the mission, spirit and quality of Heartwood. The play addresses the difficult sociological, psychological, and spiritual questions surrounding this event, which occurred in a small town comprised largely of good, hard working, well meaning families. This legend, as legends so often do, offers a line of truth and universal lessons.

Innovative and creative technical elements are standard fare at Heartwood, where Braley has free artistic reign over set, costumes, light, and music. From a bare, black stage, has risen a set constructed of beams, barrels and burlap, accentuated with maple trees and authentic pieces of history, from long forgotten hooks and piles in old barns. Lights of every color – spots, gobos and washes – illuminate each moment, each scene. Computer manipulated projections enhance the atmosphere, offering visual insights to this legend.

And then – there is music. As Braley puts it, “As I worked with the script over the past two years, (originally written and performed as a one act while directing at Wiscasset High School in 2006) the songs just started to come, evolving from the story, the characters, my own Maine memories, and a life-long love for music. I hesitate to call it ‘a musical,’ but there are 18 pieces woven throughout the script”

Developing and performing this production is a cast of 21 trained performers/musicians from around the country. Original, authentic musical pieces lift and tell the tale, from traditional Canadian and Eastern folk music to edgy new folk sounds, male acapella, an Irish jig, art songs and choral pieces. Electric stringed instruments, a period harmonium, acoustic guitars, banjo, cajon, and numerous found objects – all blend together in this organic mix of voice and sound.

The bold choice to create original theater is a distinguishing characteristic of Braley's directing career and of Heartwood. Individual donations help to make this possible. To make a gift of support or to learn more about this project, visit Heartwood's Rockethub fundraising portal. Google "Rockethub" and search "Heartwood."

For fun – visit Jim Cullen's facebook page and see how Jim feels about the show!

A video promo of this production, along with a slideshow overview including photos of the original characters, resides on Heartwood's website at www.heartwoodtheater.org, Heartwood's Facebook and Rockethub sites. For questions or reservations, visit the website, email info@heartwoodtheater.org or call 207.563.1373.

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