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MoHiP Theatre tackles our difficult past with *Song of the Middle River*

On the evening of Friday, February 6, nearly 400 people gathered in Boonville's Thespian Hall to see the latest MoHiP production, *Song of the Middle River*. The play, by Thomas Pawley III, Lincoln University professor emeritus, tells the story of Celia, a young slave woman who killed her master, Callaway County slave owner Robert Newsom, in 1855 after enduring his sexual abuse and control for many years. Court records document facts of the murder and Celia's conviction and subsequent hanging by local authorities.

Francis Blackchild, playwright and George Washington Carver fellow at the University of Missouri, directed the presentation using a reader's theatre format. Celia was played by the gifted young actress and University of Missouri

Department of Theatre student Mallory Raven-Ellen Backstrom. Distinguished actor and MU professor Clyde Ruffin held two roles; first, Josh the Griot, who introduced the story through song that wove wisdom and foretold disaster, and George, the love interest of Celia, whose honorable and forthright affection moved her toward attempts to end Newsom's sexual exploitation, which had already brought her two children and an elevated yet unenviable position within slave ranks and among white women in the household.

Veteran newscaster, published historian, and Society trustee Bob Priddy admirably took on the role of the frightening and frightened Newsom. KBIA radio producer Darren Hellwege played

William Powell, Newsom's neighbor, who threatened Celia into confession. Phebe Lauffer, Paige Sommerer, Steve Robertson, and Andrew Crawford played Newsom's adult children while Libbi Gordon read stage direction.

As part of the performance, talented Boonville musicians Cathy Barton and Dave Para performed lively and beautiful African American spirituals and freedom songs.

The next MoHiP Theatre production, *Lion of the West*, will be held in Thespian Hall on Friday, September 25, as part of the Missouri chapter of the Santa Fe Trail Association's annual celebration. Written by James Kirke Paulding in 1831, the play was adapted by James Hackett during the nineteenth century and, more recently, by MoHiP Artistic Director Mary Barile.



photo by Meredith Wilson

Clyde Ruffin, Mallory Backstrom, and Bob Priddy perform *Song of the Middle River* at Thespian Hall in Boonville