

STAGE DIRECTIONS

WITH HEDY WEISS



Outsider art sets the frame for 'Wendall Greene'

The challenge? To conjure the world of the rural South—poor, rustic, agrarian, racist—without resorting to the usual visual clichés. And from the moment they met to discuss their world-premiere production of "Wendall Greene" by the Arkansas-bred, Chicago-based writer Jeffrey Mangrum, director Rondi Reed and set designer Brian Sidney Bembridge realized they were in perfect agreement.

As Bembridge recalls, "The first words out of Rondi's mouth were, 'I'm thinking about outsider art, something a little primitive, maybe even with a bit of voodoo.' And that was exactly what I'd had in mind. I wanted to create an environment that had the raw, self-taught, sometimes visionary quality of those artists who work with whatever materials they can find."

Mangrum's play, which opens this weekend at the Steppenwolf Studio, concerns the friendship between Wendall Greene, a black farmer (Tim Edward Rhoze), and a white boy, Jimmy (Will Malnati). Jimmy's mother, Cindy (Mariann Mayberry), is a woman desperate for a way out of her predicament. And she is being pursued by a Las Vegas gambler, Cooch (Joe Forbrich), who believes she has somehow stolen his luck by way of a chain letter.

"It's about hopelessness and what emerges as a result of it," said Reed, the popular Steppenwolf ensemble actress whose previous directing credits, including "Lydie

'WENDALL GREENE'

WHEN: Through Aug. 25

WHERE: Steppenwolf Studio Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted

TICKETS: \$18-\$27

CALL: (312) 335-1650

Breeze" and "Stepping Out" (as well as an ill-fated take on "Ring Around the Moon"), date back to the 1980s. "This play has the feeling of a fable, with a bit of backwoods folklore and a touch of mysticism. It's not 'Crimes of the Heart' or some Southern gothic thing. And the hardest part of doing it has been to get the tone right—to avoid the clichéd approach and to find what's authentic."

For Bembridge, Mangrum's play also presented other challenges.

"The script reads almost like a screenplay, moving quickly from a country store to a backyard to a car to a forest, with many quick jumps," the designer said. "And working in a relatively small space and with a limited budget, this required a certain abstract approach."

Although the set is not a copy of the work of any particular outsider artist, it is, according to Bembridge, "a little like the House of Blues, with the influence of several people, like R.A. Miller of Georgia,



Cindy (Mariann Mayberry), a single mother, chats with Prichet (Robert Brøuler) in the world-premiere production of Jeffrey Mangrum's "Wendell Greene," opening Sunday at Steppenwolf Studio Theatre.

Hawkins Balden and John JB Murray. Their art uses existing stuff to make things; it's all about creative recycling. So we have a 12-foot wall of glass bottles that lights up, we've incorporated bottle caps and made a forest of painted poles. The walls of Cindy's house flip down so that the inside becomes the outside. We made a whirligig from bicycle wheel spokes. It was really great fun."

Bembridge, who grew up in New Hampshire and attended the North Carolina School of the Arts before settling in Chicago, began his career as a performer, mixing lighting design with scenic design. Among his most memorable sets are those for this season's Looking-glass Theatre Company production of "Summertime"—a Martha's Vineyard seaside retreat so magical

and alluring that you wished you could rent it. He'll be collaborating with director Gary Griffin on sets for a new approach to Stephen Sondheim's "Sunday in the Park with George" to be staged at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre.

For Reed, one of the draws of "Wendall Greene" was its mix of the realistic and non-realistic, which goes well beyond the visual.

"Jeffrey [Mangrum] deals with the rites of passage of a young boy raised by a single mother, with the idea of mentorship, and with the notion of growing against a backdrop of racism," the director said. "There's a strong spiritual and mystical aspect to the play, too. It's set in a place where things have been left a little bit untouched by civilization—a place where poverty and isolation exist



Set designer Brian Sidney Bembridge and director Rondi Reed were on the same page.

in tension with the outside world. And that world can seem full of possibilities."