

“Alabama Story”: A New Play About Books, Race, Censorship and the American Character

Oct 31, 2023



Jeanne Paulsen as Emily Reed in “Alabama Story” at The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. (Photo by John Gitchoff)

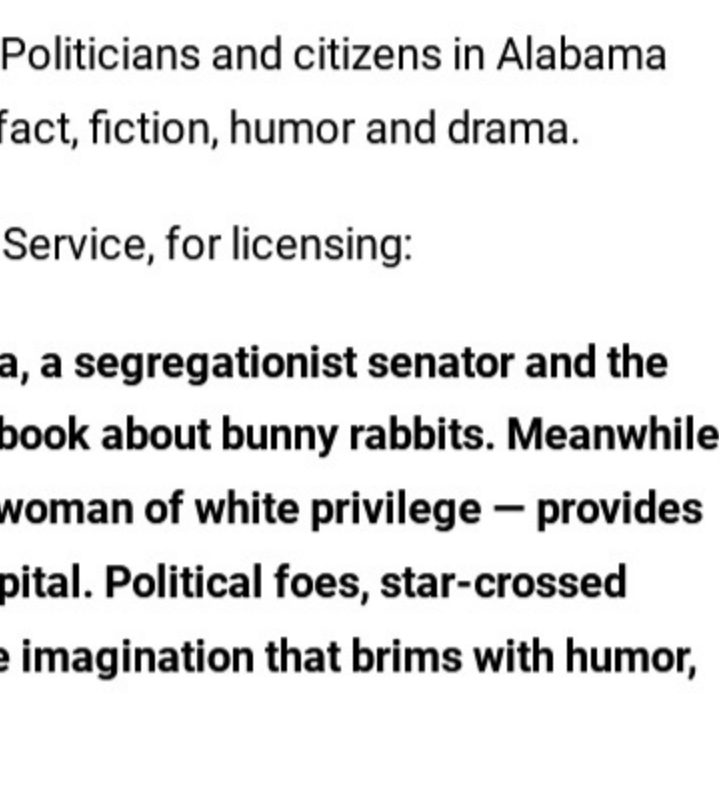
Alabama Story, playwright **Kenneth Jones’** six-actor, one-set drama about censorship, book banning, Civil Rights and American character in “the Deep South of the imagination,” had its world premiere by **Pioneer Theatre Company** in Salt Lake City, Utah. By early 2024, the highly theatrical play will have been produced in more than 60 cities, introducing the world to the little-known true story of a librarian named Emily Wheelock Reed, who was persecuted by politicians for protecting a children’s picture book in the Jim Crow South.

Seventeen new productions — at professional, amateur and school theaters — are appearing in the 2023-24 season.

The Washington Post called it a play “of national relevance.” In 2019, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote, “At a time when intolerance is on the upswing and empathy is under siege, *Alabama Story* is just the play we need.” The play has become more urgent in recent years as conservatives have sought to target books, librarians, libraries and schools.

Alabama Story is published and licensed by Dramatists Play Service. Get an electronic copy of the play or the printed Acting Edition and/or inquire about performance rights through the DPS website, by clicking here. Interested theaters can always contact the playwright directly to snag a quick perusal copy of the script, or if there are further questions.

The controversial and challenged children’s book at the center of *Alabama Story* is called “The Rabbits’ Wedding,” and it depicts a black rabbit marrying a white rabbit. The year 2018 marked [the 60th anniversary of the book’s 1958 publication](#). Politicians and citizens in Alabama wanted the book burned. The play is set in 1959, and freely mixes fact, fiction, humor and drama.



Greta Lambert as Emily Reed in the 2020 Alabama Shakespeare Festival production of “Alabama Story.” Scenic design is by Brian Sidney Benbridge. (Photo by Stewart Edmonds)

This is how the two-act *Alabama Story* is billed by Dramatists Play Service, for licensing:

As the Civil Rights movement is brewing in Montgomery, Alabama, a segregationist senator and the no-nonsense state librarian clash over the content of a children’s book about bunny rabbits. Meanwhile, a reunion of childhood friends — an African American man and a woman of white privilege — provides a private counterpoint to the public events swirling in the state capital. Political foes, star-crossed lovers, and one feisty children’s author inhabit a Deep South of the imagination that brims with humor, heartbreak, and hope. Inspired by true events.

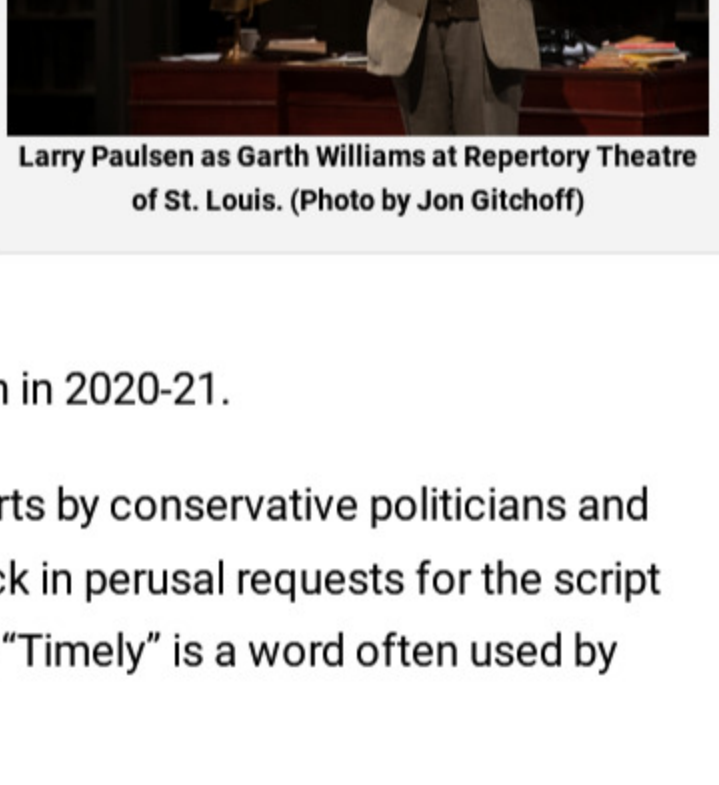
Playwright Kenneth Jones characterized *Alabama Story* this way: “It’s a political thriller, a memory play, a workplace drama, a romance, a history, a tearjerker, a comedy, a discussion about race, censorship and political will. Most important, it’s a play about how we behave when we face terrible circumstances — how character is revealed in times of transition, change and crisis.”

The Cape Cod Times wrote that the play “artfully explores Southern attitudes when the civil rights movement is catching fire” and that “Jones effectively unites the political and personal.”

The drama seeks to be playful, serious, smart, funny, dark and hopeful all at once. It’s also a love letter to reading — and librarians.

When the play had its Washington, DC, premiere by Washington Stage Guild, The Washington Post wrote, “The 2015 play feels timely, resonating with this era’s racial tensions, the ‘she persisted’ meme and continuing controversy over the Old South’s legacy. The topicality of *Alabama Story* infuses a theatrical moment that feels spontaneous yet intriguingly layered.”

In March 2020, seven years after it had its first developmental reading by Alabama Shakespeare Festival (in its Southern Writers Project) in Montgomery, the play [finally got a full production by ASF](#) in the city where the action is set — where the real events happened. COVID prompted the cancellation of the final week of the run, and most American theaters went dark for the next 18 months.

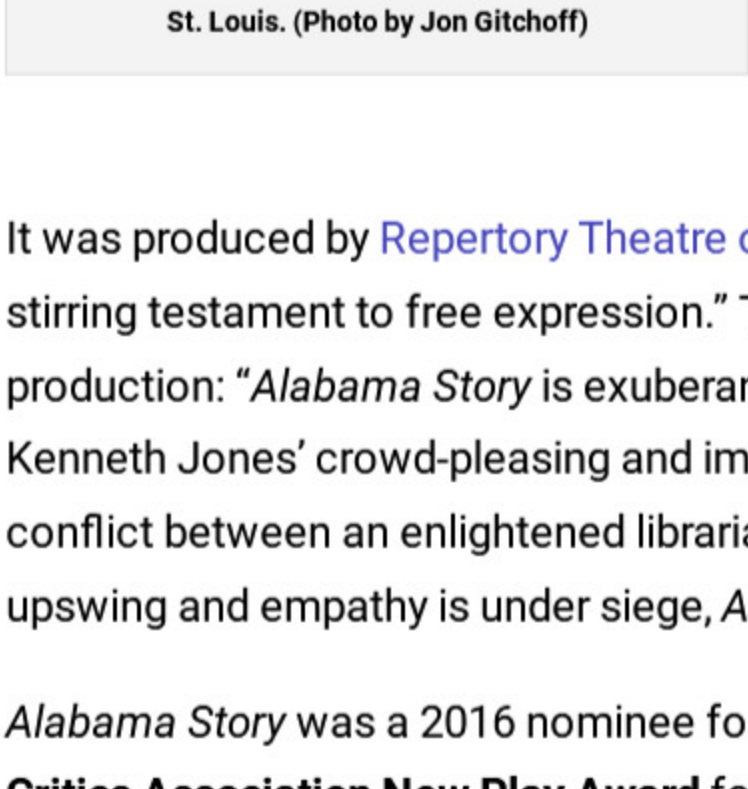


Larry Paulsen as Garth Williams at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. (Photo by Jon Gitchoff)

However, a slew of [online webinar-style readings, outdoor staged readings and even a full production created for pay-per-view streaming](#) popped up in response to the COVID shutdown in 2020-21.

The play’s 2021 publication — as well as high-profile renewed efforts by conservative politicians and parents to have books banned in the U.S. — has prompted an uptick in perusal requests for the script from theaters throughout North America. ([Request a script here.](#)) “Timely” is a word often used by critics to describe the play.

It was so popular in fall 2023 at Pensacola Little Theatre in Florida, a performance was added to the sold-out run.



Jeanne Paulsen, Carl Howell, Carol Palmer and Larry Paulsen in “Alabama Story” at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. (Photo by Jon Gitchoff)

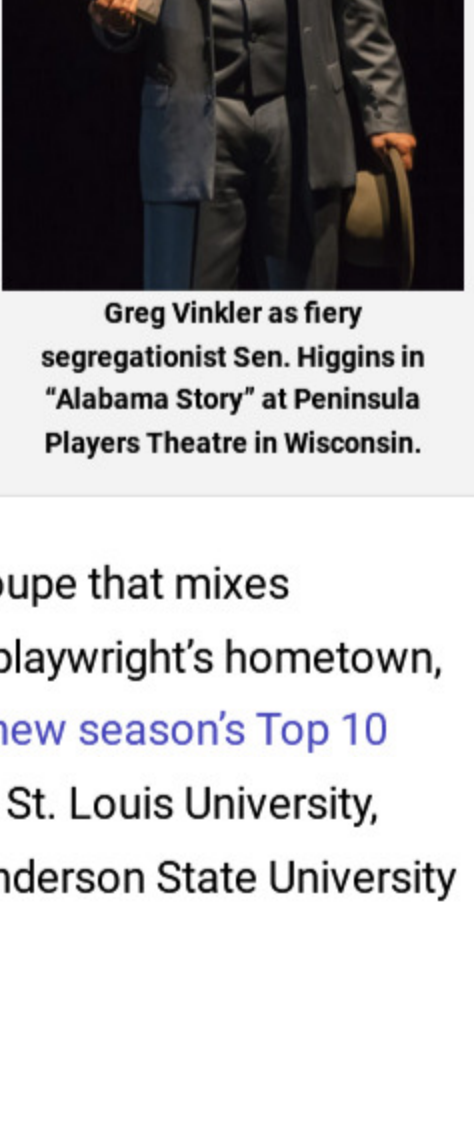
Through Dramatists Play Service, **colleges, amateur troupes and high schools have access to an amended script**, which expands casting possibilities. Its various appearances around North America have come in many forms, including full productions with multiple sets, full productions on a unit set, concert readings with some design elements, barebones staged readings and one script-in-hand staged reading that featured librarians playing key roles. Equity and non-Equity companies, civic and community troupes, and high school and colleges have presented the play.

It was produced by [Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in January 2019](#), where the company billed it as “a stirring testament to free expression.” The St. Louis Post Dispatch said this about the production: “*Alabama Story* is exuberant, hilarious and timely. A children’s picture book is at the heart of Kenneth Jones’ crowd-pleasing and imaginatively theatrical comedy-drama inspired by the real-life conflict between an enlightened librarian and a bigoted politician. At a time when intolerance is on the upswing and empathy is under siege, *Alabama Story* is just the play we need.”

Alabama Story was a 2016 nominee for the **Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award** following its world premiere and a **finalist for the National Playwrights Conference of the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center**.

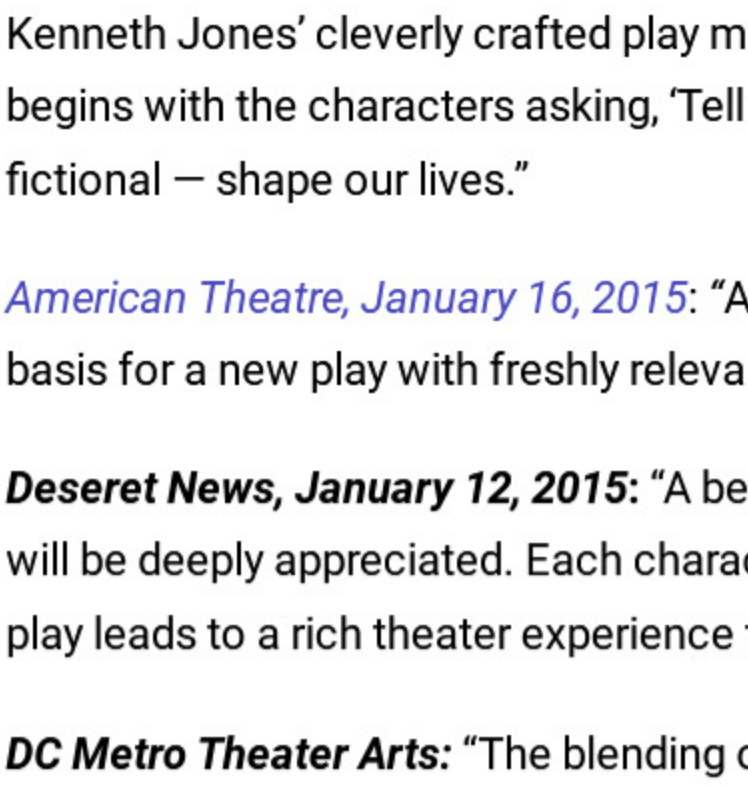
Following its premiere, a second Equity production produced by [Florida Studio Theatre played eight weeks in April and May 2016](#), marking the play’s Southern premiere. ([Here’s a review from the Sarasota Observer.](#)) Its [Midwest premiere was at Peninsula Players Theatre](#) in Wisconsin in August 2016. In late August 2016 it had its New England premiere by [Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater](#) on Cape Cod, where it earned [rave reviews](#).

Its fourth regional production was [the Michigan premiere and the first to break into the university market](#): The Theatre Company, an acclaimed hybrid troupe that mixes professionals and undergrads at University of Detroit Mercy, produced it in the playwright’s hometown, in fall 2016. (Even before it opened, The Detroit Free Press called it [one of the new season’s Top 10 must-see productions](#). Listen to the WDET/NPR [interview with the playwright.](#)) St. Louis University, Nassau Community College, Messiah University, Frostburg State University, Henderson State University and other colleges have since embraced the play.



Greg Vinkler as fiery segregationist Sen. Higgins in “Alabama Story” at Peninsula Players Theatre in Wisconsin.

Here’s a roundup of some of the press attention ([with more here](#)):



Danny Bernardy and Jean Taft in the Florida Studio Theatre production of “Alabama Story” by Kenneth Jones. (Photo by Matthew Holler)

Sarasota Observer, April 13, 2016: “The playwright evokes the Deep South of 1959 with spot-on dialog and dialect. Jones has a keen ear for cultivated Southern patois… You’ll want to get to know Jones’ characters. The only crusader in the bunch is on the wrong side. The rest quietly do the right thing. They don’t shout about their principles. But they stand on them.”

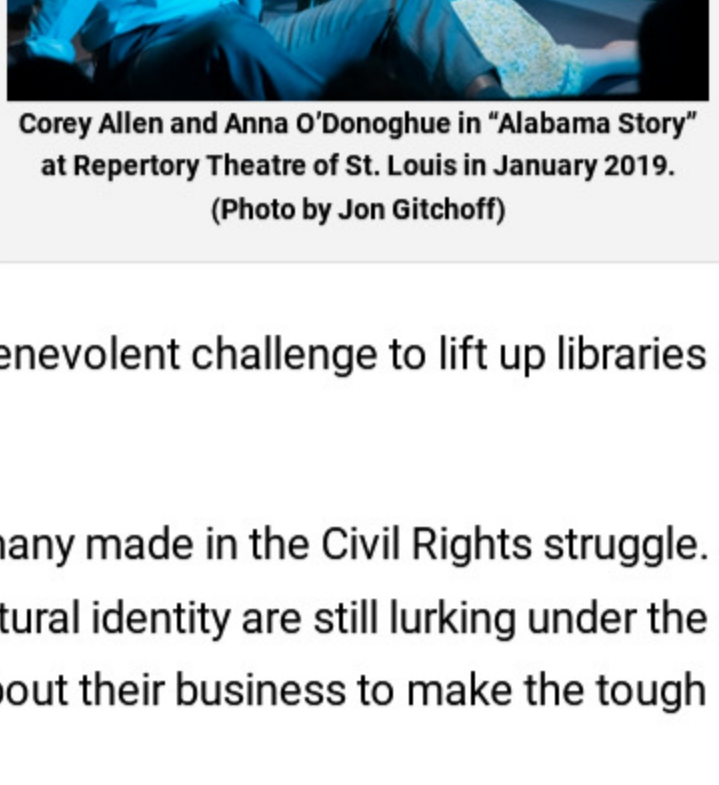
Salt Lake Tribune, January 13, 2015: “Razor-sharp direction. As the first of Pioneer Theatre Company’s newly instated Play-by-Play reading series to receive a full production, *Alabama Story* marks an impressive debut. Its ability to dramatically merge history and personal stories promises it a life far beyond this production. Kenneth Jones’ cleverly crafted play making its world premiere at Pioneer Theatre Company…ends as it begins with the characters asking, ‘Tell me a story,’ and the unifying strand is the way stories — real and fictional — shape our lives.”

American Theatre, January 16, 2015: “A real-life controversy about a children’s book from 1959 is the basis for a new play with freshly relevant themes.”

Deseret News, January 12, 2015: “A beautiful production full of warmth and endearing moments that will be deeply appreciated. Each character in emerging playwright Kenneth Jones’ finely crafted new play leads to a rich theater experience that is being warmly received in its premiere staging.”

DC Metro Theater Arts: “The blending of real and fictional characters works well, and the play has unique resonance for today’s audiences. In the era of Fake News and unceasing attacks on journalism, *Alabama Story* not only touches on themes of censorship, integration, politics, and romance but reminds us of the importance of facing the truth.”

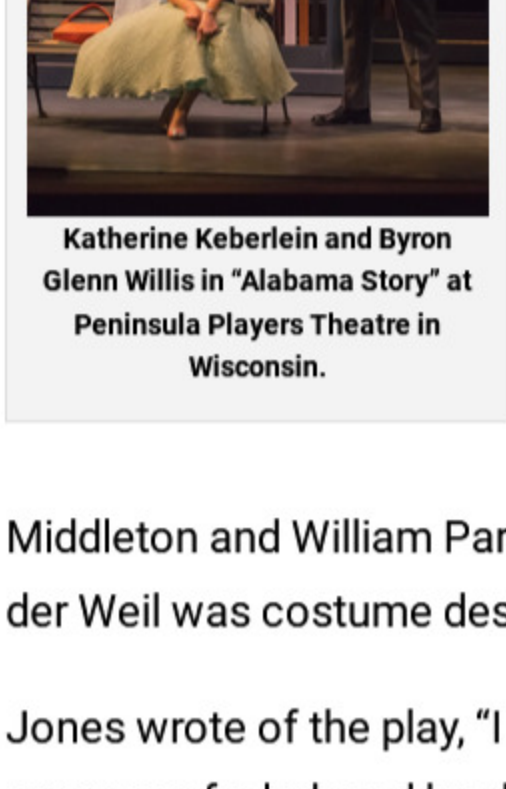
DC Metro Weekly: “Offering a warmly palatable dramatization of Civil Rights-era American history, Washington Stage Guild’s *Alabama Story* explores thorny racial issues with smarts and sensitivity. [The play] also poses a benevolent challenge to lift up libraries and librarians, champions of the invaluable freedom to read.”



Corey Allen and Anna O'Donoghue in “Alabama Story” at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in January 2019. (Photo by Jon Gitchoff)

DC Theatre Scene: “The script touches on the sacrifices that so many made in the Civil Rights struggle. Feelings of superiority, entitlement, separateness and extreme cultural identity are still lurking under the surface of our social fabric. And it takes everyday people going about their business to make the tough decisions and take the actions necessary to change the story.”

[Listen to the 2019 KDHX St. Louis podcast interview between host Deborah Sharn and playwright Kenneth Jones.](#)



Katherine Keberlein and Byron Glenn Willis in “Alabama Story” at Peninsula Players Theatre in Wisconsin.

Alabama Story — featuring four men and two women on a flexible stage — puts political foes, star-crossed childhood friends, and one feisty children’s author on the same page in a Deep South of the imagination. This love letter to reading — a [finalist in the 2014 National Playwrights Conference of the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center](#) — leaps from pages of history, exploring the moving story that earned librarian Emily Reed international headlines when she defended “The Rabbits’ Wedding,” a picture book by Garth Williams, best known for his artwork for “Little House on the Prairie” and “Charlotte’s Web.”

Truth is stranger than fiction when a book about a black rabbit marrying a white rabbit is put on the shelves of the Alabama State Library. The original 2015 Pioneer Theatre Company cast featured Seth Andrew Bridges, Stephen D’Ambrose, Samuel Ray Gates, Greta Lambert, Kate Middleton and William Parry. James Noone designed sets, Phil Monat was lighting designer, Brenda van der Weil was costume designer, Amanda French was hair and makeup designer.



Stephen D’Ambrose and Greta Lambert in the premiere of “Alabama Story” at Pioneer Theatre Company. (Photo by Alex Weisman)

Jones wrote of the play, “I hope that *Alabama Story* sparks a memory of a beloved book, the person who gave it to you and the day you realized that a turning of the page could be both terrifying and wonderful, and that — on some level, no matter what our differences — we all share the same story.” (See [playbill notes below.](#))

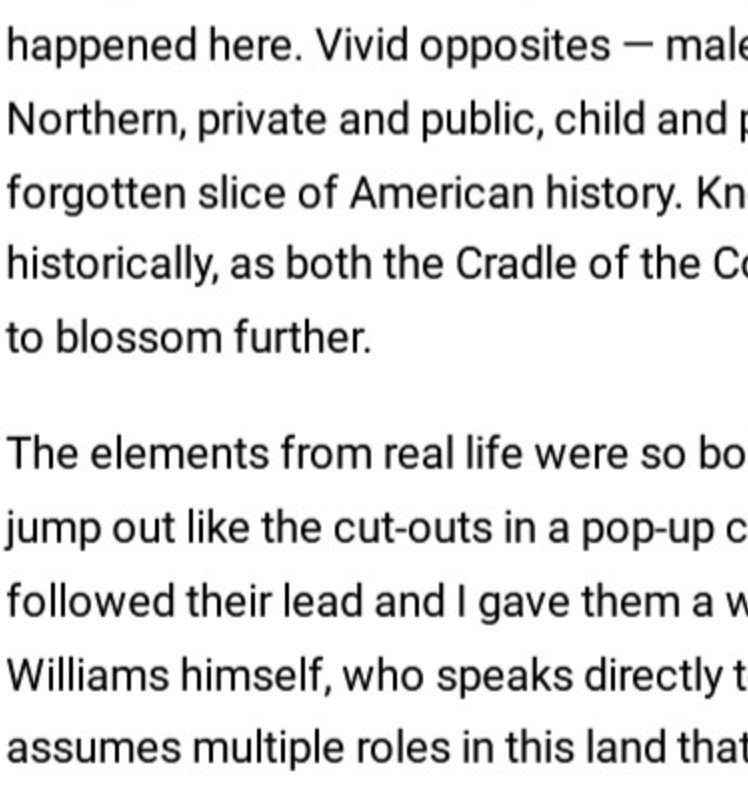
A monologue from *Alabama Story* was published in the 2015 edition of “The Best Men’s Monologues” (Smith & Kraus).

Under the direction of Karen Azenberg, *Alabama Story* was developed in readings in the Southern Writers Project of Alabama Shakespeare Festival (May 2013), Play-By-Play New Reading Festival at Pioneer Theatre Company (April 2013) and NewTACTics New Readings Festival by Off-Broadway’s TACT/The Actors Company Theatre (June 2014). Karen Azenberg directed the premiere production at Pioneer Theatre Company.

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Here are playwright’s notes that have appeared in programs and on websites of theaters that have produced *Alabama Story*.

Playwright Kenneth Jones shares what attracted him to the real-life story behind his Southern-set historical drama, and what emerged in the writing process.

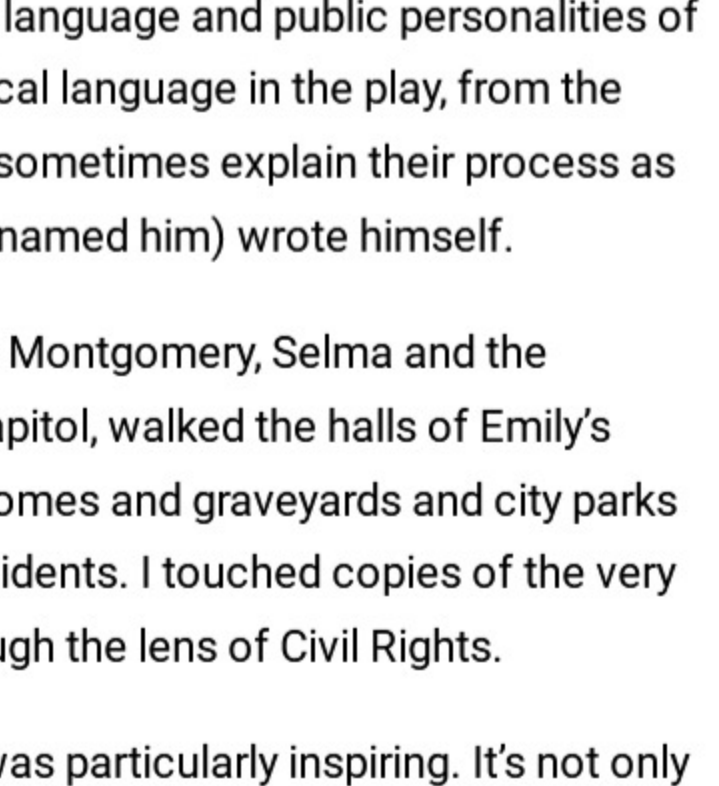


Paul Tavlinini as Garth Williams introduces Cynthia Collins as Emily Reed in Actors Theatre of Indiana’s “Alabama Story.”

In May 2000, while reading the *New York Times*, I came across the story of Emily Wheelock Reed, the former State Librarian of Alabama who had been challenged by a segregationist state senator in 1959. Senator E.O. Eddins demanded that a children’s picture book — Garth Williams’ *The Rabbits’ Wedding*, about a black rabbit marrying a white rabbit — be purged from the shelves of Alabama libraries on the grounds that it promoted race-mixing. Their conflict was reported worldwide. Before I finished reading the article, I knew this was an idea for a play.

Strong characters and richly contrasting conflicts rarely just fall into my lap, but that’s exactly what happened here. Vivid opposites — male and female, black and white, insider and outsider, Southern and Northern, private and public, child and parent, purity and ugliness — were immediately evident in this forgotten slice of American history. Knowing that Montgomery, Alabama, is so highly charged, historically, as both the Cradle of the Confederacy and the Cradle of Civil Rights helped my imagination to blossom further.

The elements from real life were so bold that they seemed to jump out like the cut-outs in a pop-up children’s book. I followed their lead and I gave them a wrangler in Garth Williams himself, who speaks directly to the audience and assumes multiple roles in this land that I call The Deep South of the Imagination. (Williams’ indelible illustrations were likely part of your childhood — he created the art for “Little House on the Prairie,” “Charlotte’s Web,” “Stuart Little” and more). I never approached my play as a dry docudrama; the goal was to make it “pop up” in a way that can only happen in the theatre.



Carl Howell as assistant librarian Thomas at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. (Photo by Jon Gitchoff)

Emily Reed’s story was widely documented in newspapers and magazines at the time, so a lot of source material existed, allowing me to steal and expand upon the actual language and public, personal stories of the participants. In fact, some of the most outrageous and theatrical language in the play, from the saber-rattling senator, is not made up. You know how playwrights sometimes explain their process as “the play wrote itself”? Well, in many ways Senator Higgins (as I renamed him) wrote himself.

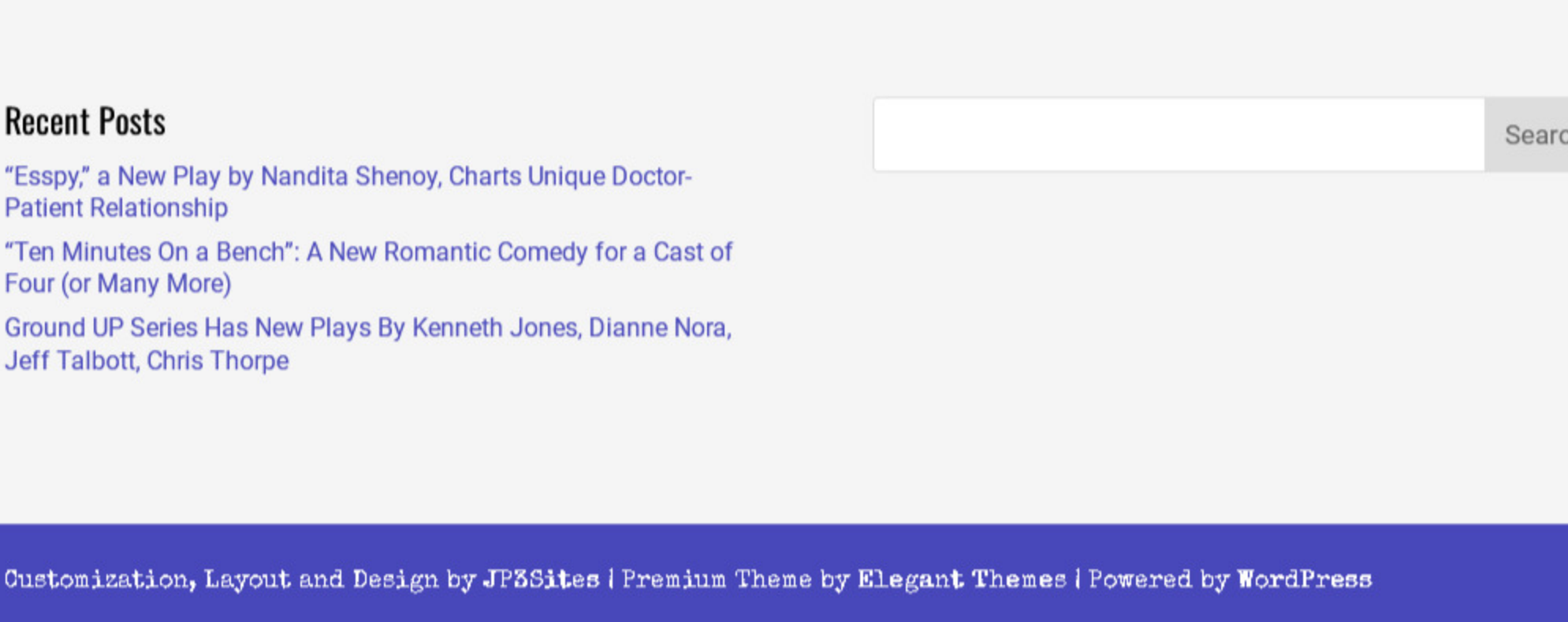
The process of creating *Alabama Story* included research visits to Montgomery, Selma and the senator’s hometown of Demopolis, Alabama. I toured the State Capitol, walked the halls of Emily’s library office in the State Archive Building, wandered antebellum homes and graveyards and city parks and museums. I interviewed local historians and librarians and residents. I touched copies of the very newspapers that first reported this unique tale of censorship through the lens of Civil Rights.



Chris White and Rachel Moulton in Florida Studio Theatre’s staging. (Photo by Matthew Holler)

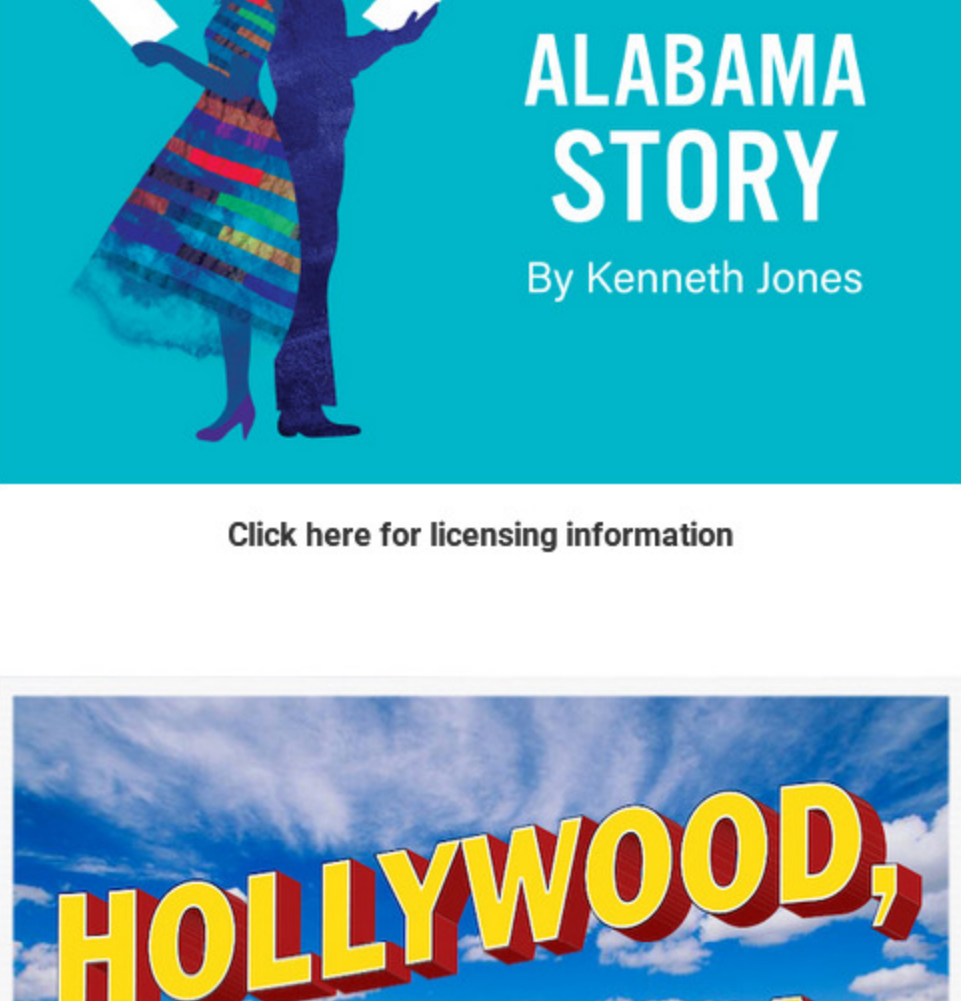
The trip to Demopolis was particularly inspiring. It’s not only Senator Higgins’ stomping ground, but what I imagined as the childhood home of two characters who appear in the play’s reflective story. Joshua and Lily, a black man and a white woman who were once childhood friends in that small town, reunite in Montgomery the same year that the library battle is being waged. They are meant to suggest the private heart of the public controversy. Like the others in the play, they have a deep connection to books and reading, and the quality of their character will be challenged in their exchanges. I view *Alabama Story* as a mash-up of some of my favorite kinds of plays — courtroom thriller, memory play, romance, historical drama — but underneath all of that is a script about how character is tested in a time of great social change. How will you behave toward others when your world is turned upside down?

I hope that *Alabama Story* sparks a memory of a beloved book, the person who gave it to you and the day that you realized that a “turning of the page” — whether moving forward in a book or in your personal evolution — could be both terrifying and wonderful. Maybe the play will also be a reminder that no matter what our differences, on some level, we all share the same story.



William Parry, Stephen D’Ambrose, Seth Andrew Bridges and Greta Lambert in “Alabama Story” at Pioneer Theatre Company. (Photo by Alex Weisman)

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