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March 28, 2011

3/21/2011 10:17:00 AM

Shier honoring Williams with tour de force

John McCurdy
Staff Writer

One idea prevalent throughout Macon-native, Atlanta-resident Sid Shier's adventure of a life is ownership. As a boy at his hometown's Congregation Sha'arey Israel, he laid claim to the stage in the basement, sneaking in through windows after-hours to do what he wanted.

The same goes for the auditorium at Lanier High School for Boys. He relates a story in which he enforces decorum, making an orchestra member follow professional etiquette and walk around back stage rather than clamber up from the front row.

"Nobody did anything without my say-so," he said with a chuckle. "I know that sounds ridiculous, but it happens to be true."

And now, at 74, Shier is making his own the one-act, one-actor "Confessions of a Nightingale," a hugely successful piece put together by Ray Stricklyn and Charlotte Chandler from interviews the latter conducted with Tennessee Williams. Sid, as both producer and star, has forged a deep personal connection with the work and surrounded himself with crew he trusts to make an honest, original and intimate rendition starting Mar. 24 at the 14th St. Playhouse.



At 74, actor/producer/designer Sid Shier shows no signs of slowing down.

He's only just coming back to the passion he put on hold for nearly two decades with a move to Los Angeles to concentrate on his "other" career, interior decorating. After many busy years out there working for big-name clients, during which he also discovered a third love, facilitating with peer support organization Shanti, he's returning to Georgia to do what's always been in his heart.

Not that it was as simple as that.

"I was well-known here up until 1988, but when you're gone for 20 years, you get, 'What was your name again?' and 'What have you done lately?'" Shier laughed. "That's when I thought, 'Maybe I'll consider doing something myself.'"

Sid read through several plays, among them "Confessions..." which he quickly discarded due to a lengthy 47 pages of dialogue. He later returned to it, though, reading it in Williams' own voice, which he'd heard on radio and TV when younger, and it made a stronger impression the second time around.

For more than a year he worked on memorizing the lines only, not even testing the waters for a director until he was ready. Finally he dropped Jody Feldman at the Alliance Theatre a line, and she immediately hooked him up with Patrick McColery, who was fresh off "Bring It On: The Musical."

The fit ended up remarkably right.

"I was working with 30 young people who were quite athletic, and it was such a completely different

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experience than a one-person show with a man in his 70s," McColery said with a smile. "But it's been nice. What's great about the piece is this wisdom of an artist toward the end of his life, looking back, expressing himself so eloquently with all these truths.

"That's what's been really great for me and what I love exploring with Sid."

But back to the concept that this play is Shier's: He also designed the set, provided very specific instructions for the lighting, and brought on his daughters Robyn Shier and Lynn Hassett as production house manager and stage manager, respectively. His stamp of approval is everywhere, yet this is not an issue of need for control.

At its very core, this is still an expression of Williams, who Sid calls "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, playwrights of the 20th century." The focus is on the deep thoughts that an immensely talented and brave writer had toward the end, and the hope is to get them across effectively.

"What was interesting about Williams was, he could say something to make you cry and in one second - bingo - hit a one-liner to make you laugh," Shier said. "So everybody's going to take away something different. I can't possibly know, but if one person in there wants to hear the story, it worked."

Not-so-coincidentally, just two days after opening night, the nation will celebrate what would have been the 100th birthday of the man on whose words and thoughts "Confessions..." is based. The man who's putting the play on will certainly partake in the recognition, but at the same time he is embarking on a new beginning for himself.

"For me, the fact that he's almost 75 years old and now creating a new life for himself is a big deal," daughter Robyn said. "He's moving forward, feeling like he's got a lot more life to live." Tickets for an intense and enjoyable evening are available at woodruffcenter.org/Calendar.aspx or the 14th St. box office at (404) 733-4738.

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