

Highlander Center early days are told in Clarence Brown Theatre's 'People Where They Are'

[Amy McRary, Knoxville News Sentinel](#) | [Published 5:00 a.m. ET](#) | [Sept. 26, 2019](#)

Write a play about Tennessee, the California playwright was told.

Create this play for six University of Tennessee graduate acting students. Of course make it interesting, both for UT's Clarence Brown Theatre audiences and to yourself as well.

So began what is now "People Where They Are," playwright Anthony Clarvoe's two-act play about the early work of the Highlander Research and Education Center and its expansion into the Civil Rights movement.

Six UT master's of fine arts students perform the play Oct. 2-20 at the CBT complex's Carousel Theatre. Tickets and showtimes are at <https://clarencebrowntheatre.com>.

A Civil Rights icon

Begun in 1932 in Grundy County and located in Morristown since 1972, the center is known for social justice and civil rights work. Citizenship schools organized by Highlander trained civil rights pioneers Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Folk singer/activist Pete Seeger learned the words to civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" at a Highlander workshop.

Clarvoe was commissioned to write the play that premieres at the Carousel. It's co-directed by Calvin MacLean, Clarence Brown's producing artistic director and head of the UT theater department, and Chicago-based actress/director/teacher Dee Dee Battest.

Set in 1955, "People Where They Are" shows the efforts and impact of the center through the interaction of six characters. Two - with the last names of Mrs. Clark and Mr. Carawan - are based on educator and civil rights activist Septima Clark and folk singer Guy Carawan. The other four actors play composite characters based on several real, but different, people.

Everything that happens in "People Where They Are" really happened, Clarvoe told USA TODAY NETWORK-Tennessee. But this is a play and history's timeline has been rearranged, compressed.

Why the Highlander?



Anthony Clarvoe

It's been a two-year process to get "People Where They Are" on paper and then on stage. So how did a Berkeley, California, playwright and teacher create a story about a Tennessee social justice and civil rights institution?

Enter MacLean. He and Clarvoe have worked together before. MacLean won a 1997 Joseph Jefferson Award for directing Clarvoe's play "The Living" with Chicago's Famous Door Theatre Company.

"Flash forward a couple of decades," Clarvoe says. The two men met at a New York theater conference and MacLean asked Clarvoe to write a play for UT's six master's of fine arts students before they graduate. "That's a great way to write a play, and I said 'Sure,'" Clarvoe recalls.

MacLean also wanted the play to be about Tennessee.

"I lived in rural Ohio off and on for 20 years and I passed through Tennessee," Clarvoe says. "But I could not claim to know the state. I love learning new things, so that was very intriguing to me."

To find his inspiration, Clarvoe “thought and thought and read and read and looked and looked.” Then he “happened upon” the 1985 documentary “You Got to Move” about the Highlander and people inspired by it.

“I said, ‘Wait a minute, could this not be more perfect? Here are young, idealistic people - like the people in the graduate program. It’s about Tennessee, but it’s also a national story.’”

‘A fresh story’

It was, he discovered, “still a fresh story to be told.”

And maybe more timely than he’d imagined. A fire of undetermined origin destroyed the Highlander’s main office this March. A white supremacist-linked racist symbol was found spray-painted nearby.

So while “People Where They Are” focuses on history, Clarvoe says it incorporates today’s questions about race, violence and how people act toward those who are different.

The theater is sponsoring several events in connection with the run of “People Where They Are.” Among them is a free 2 p.m. Oct. 19 benefit concert at the Carousel for the center. The concert features music by Michael and Carrie Kline. Michael Kline was the center’s 1968-69 staff musician.

Author, sociologist and former coal miner and union organizer Wess Harris will speak at a symposium after the play’s 2 p.m. Oct. 20 show. Harris will recount his experiences with Don West, a Highlander co-founder.



Martin Luther King, Pete Seeger, Charis Horton, Rosa Parks, and Ralph Abernathy at the Highlander Folk School in 1957 in Monteagle. Photo from the Highlander Center. 10/25/05



The workshop attended by Rosa Parks at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle in the summer of 1955. Rosa Parks is seated at the end of the table in the back. 10/25/2005.



Attendees gather in the upper workshop center for a session on cultural organizing led by Marquez Rhyne and Tufara Waller Muhammad during the 80th anniversary celebration at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market Saturday, Sept. 1, 2012. News Sentinel Archives



Martin Luther King at the Highlander Center.