

ALABAMA STORY

Auditions: Sunday December 10th 7:30pm and Monday December 11th 7:30pm

Auditions will be readings from the script. Headshots and resumes welcome but not necessary.

PLOT

Inspired by true events...It's 1959, and the Civil Rights Movement is starting to grip America. In Montgomery, Alabama, a gentle children's book stirs the passions of a segregationist senator and a no-nonsense librarian. A contrasting story of childhood friends — an African-American man and a woman of white privilege who are reunited in Montgomery that same year — provides private counterpoint to the public events of the play. Political foes, star-crossed lovers, and one feisty children's author inhabit the same page to conjure a Deep South of the imagination.

CHARACTERS

Garth Williams and Others: Any age, white. The author and illustrator of *The Rabbit's Wedding*. He was also the illustrator of classic young adult novels such as *The Little House on the Prairie*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Stuart Little* and the author and illustrator of original titles such as *Baby Farm Animals* and *Adventures of Benjamin Pink*. The actor that plays Williams also plays multiple roles including among others...**Bobby Crone:** A senior Representative of the Alabama House; mentor and father figure to Senator Higgins and **Herschel Webb:** A newspaper reporter with the *Montgomery Advertiser* inspired by the real-life Herschel Cribb, who extensively covered the controversy.

Emily Wheelock Reed: 50ish or more, white, the State Librarian of Alabama from 1957 to 1959. Raised in Indiana, Reed worked in libraries across the nation before landing in Montgomery, Alabama; no Southern accent. She has little sense of humor; does not suffer fools and is all-business. She steadfastly stood up to calls from segregationists to remove *The Rabbit's Wedding* from Alabama's libraries. Her obituary, published in the *New York Times* in 2000, inspired Kenneth Jones to write *Alabama Story*.

Senator E.W. Higgins: 50ish or more, a white Alabama State Senator; pronounced but not extreme Alabama accent. He is a charmer, a bully, a poisoner, a politician, a victim of the world he grew up in. This character is based on four-term Senator Edward Oswald (E.O.) Eddins of Demopolis, Alabama. He was the son of a Confederate veteran and a staunch segregationist. Eddins targeted the budget of the library system when Reed refused to take *The Rabbit's Wedding* out of circulation.

Lily Whitfield: 30ish A white woman from small-town Alabama privilege; genteel Alabama accent. She grew up in a wealthy family that owned Demopolis Cotton. She is sheltered, ashamed, loyal, religious, garrulous, charming, unhappily married, all façade, ready to blossom. Lily and Joshua were childhood friends.

Joshua Moore: 30ish An upwardly mobile middle-class African-American man from Demopolis who left Alabama more than a decade ago; purposely subtle and suppressed Alabama accent, which becomes

pronounced when agitated. His mother worked for the Whitfield family when he was a child. He is aspirational, loyal, kind, worldly, happily married, slow to boil, a disciple of Dr. King.

Thomas Franklin: 20's – 30's A white reference librarian who works as Emily's assistant. He is a Montgomery native who lives at home with his father. An Alabama native; slightly uncomfortable in his own skin, genteel, educated, loyal. The kind of man you want as your colleague, or your son.

ALABAMA STORY PLAYWRIGHT NOTE

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 politician in 1959. Alabama State Senator E.O. Eddins demanded that a children's picture book — Garth Williams' "The Rabbits' Wedding," about a rabbit with black fur marrying a rabbit with white fur — be purged from the shelves of Alabama libraries on the grounds that it promoted racial integration. 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, innocence and ugliness — were immediately evident in this now-forgotten slice of American history. Emily Reed's story was widely documented in newspapers and magazines at the time, so a lot of source material existed, allowing me to draw from and expand upon actual language and public personalities. In fact, the play's most outrageous proclamations from the bullying politician (renamed Senator Higgins) are direct quotes from the man who used to be known as "Big Ed." And when I read Emily's statement that "the free flow of information is the best means to solve the problems of the South, the nation and the world," I was inspired by the grandeur and universality of the sentence: This is a story about access, a basic human right. Little did I know that the words "free flow of information" make up one of the foundational tenets of librarianship itself. On research trips to Alabama, it came into focus that I was writing a play about censorship rather than Civil Rights, although the two are certainly tangled in Alabama Story. This was a tale about white people threatening to devour each other — and seeking to protect each other — in a time of extraordinary social change. And about how talking to one other, face to face, about difficult matters is on that continuum of "the free flow of information." Conversations matter. My trip to the small town of Demopolis, Alabama, was particularly inspiring. It's the senator's real-life stomping ground, in the middle of the state's "black belt," where plantation homes once thrived. I borrowed the setting to be the hometown of two characters I created for the play's reflective story. Lily and Joshua, a black man and a white woman who were once childhood friends in Demopolis, reunite in Montgomery the same year that Emily Reed was challenged. 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 the quality of their character will be challenged in their exchanges. 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. — Kenneth Jones