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Past and present found in statehood play

By [Dawn Miller](#)

Confession time: I did not have high hopes for Tom Rodd's amateur morality play "A New Home for Liberty," about the slavery debate during the Statehood era. But I've known Tom a long time and the cause was just -- learn more about West Virginia's past.

So I trooped over to the Civic Center Little Theater on Tuesday, with about 700 other people, and was glad I did.

The audience knew what they were getting. They were there to learn and think and support friends in the same effort. When they all came out of their seats at the end of the hour to join the cast in singing three verses of "Battle Hymn of the Republic," I thought, "Something special is happening here."

One hundred and fifty years after the Civil War, after the creation of the state and after a large part of the population won their freedom from race-based slavery, black and white residents of Kanawha County sat next to each other in a theater in Charleston watching their friends and colleagues remind us of the how we got here, and sipped punch afterward.

The play highlights the push to make the new state of West Virginia a free state. It's a little rosy. You could watch the whole thing and not realize that West Virginia entered the Union as a slave state, for example.

But through it we become better acquainted with two actual historical figures. One is [J.R. Clifford](#), born a free black child in Moorefield in 1848. He grew up to attend Storer College, to become a teacher, Union soldier, publisher of the state's first minority-owned newspaper The Pioneer Press and the state's first African-American lawyer. The other is Granville Hall, born in Harrison County in 1837. He recorded the statehood deliberations for the Wheeling Intelligencer and later served as secretary of state.

This effort preserves and transfers culture, Paul Sheridan commented to me afterward. Sheridan, deputy attorney general for the state's Civil Rights Division by day, looked pretty dapper decked

out in a long coat as Lewis Ruffner, delegate to the Statehood Convention.

There was something extra provocative about casting someone in Sheridan's job, as well as all the prominent lawyers and other professionals of public and private offices, black and white. They assumed the robes of those 19th-century ancestors, but their 21st-century real-life personas also joined them on stage.

Alan Mollohan was right at home as John Hall, calling the Statehood Convention to order, almost like he has been attending congressional committee meetings for 28 years. The same goes for circuit judges Tod Kaufman, Jay Hoke and Gary Johnson, and former Supreme Court justice Larry Starcher, looking like duly elected convention delegates. The same goes for WCHS News Editor Wes Armstead, local pastor Mel Hoover and Anthony Kinzer, director of the West Virginia Center for African-American Art and Culture, who all played black soldiers, slaves and farmers.

The volunteers, including a few community theater veterans, certainly gave their time, energy and name recognition to the project. But their stature added another dimension. Each performer was a flesh-and-blood connection to the distant thoughts, actions and decisions that created the world of today. In the shared experience of a crowded theater, each performer was a corporeal reminder of the legacy of the people who came before us.

The play appeared first in Morgantown earlier this year. Rodd hopes to schedule a similar program in the Eastern Panhandle, possibly in the spring, and then sometime in Wheeling. He's thinking about a version for schools.

If you have the chance to attend, I recommend it.

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