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## Oxendine explores culture through leading role in 'Strike at the Wind'

Darlene W. Natale Special to The Robesonian - June 30, 2023



*Billy Oxendine plays the leading role in 'Strike at the Wind.'*

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Billy Oxendine rehearses with Cheyenne Ward for the "Wedding Reception Dance." Oxendine plays the lead role of Henry Berry Lowrie's in the upcoming "Strike at the Wind" production

PEMBROKE — A historical leading role in a production first staged in 1976 may give some actors pause, but 24-year-old Billy Oxendine embraces it. He is reprising the role of Henry Berry Lowrie in "Strike at the Wind" for the third time while portraying the character who is significant to him.

"It's taken me on a journey of wanting to learn more about my culture and my people, but it also took me on this journey of acting. That's one of the things that really helped set the fire that has been sitting me today to pursue becoming an actor. And 'Strike at the Wind,' I owe a lot of my passion to that.

A 2021 UNCP graduate from Maxton, Oxendine is working towards an MFA at the Actors Studio Drama School at Pace University in New York City. He just completed his first year and said he had learned much about himself through the experience. He said he enjoys the collaborative environment of directors, actors, playwrights and coming together "to do the work we all love and are passionate about. It's just been a really fun experience so far."

He said in courses like "movement," you learn how to "free your body, allow yourself to relax while you're performing—and onstage." He has studied voice and American speech which assist him in being more flexible in how he says words. For this role, Oxendine uses his natural voice with a bit of added bass.

Oxendine is back in Robeson County for the summer and in the second week of rehearsals for "Strike at the Wind." He said he tries to discover something new to add to the role each year. "Right now, we've just started, so I haven't really found it yet. But I'm sure the more we keep playing around and get diving deeper into it all. I'll discover more."

"It becomes more real to me. I guess you could say, finding how the character does relate to me in my everyday life, because sure, the scripts like a blueprint, and the director, he gives us everything we need to be able to put on to performance, but being able to relate it more to myself. And finding these new things helps me also, sort of, I wouldn't say I enjoy the

experience more, but I gained more from it. And it's really one of the best things about taking on this role or any role in general is just discovering all the different things about yourself that you never realized were there," Oxendine said.

He said he learned about Lowrie as a child in elementary school and that the Lowrie gang was legendary. "It was an eye-opening moment for me, and I just can't let it go," he said. Oxendine is descended from one of Henry Lowrie's brothers, Peter Patrick Lowrie, making the story even more personal. Oxendine saw the play in his youth. "I was little, though; I couldn't have been older than 10." Then play was on hiatus for ten years and when it came back in 2017, Oxendine was not a part of it.

"But my sister (Wynona) was. She played Rhoda Strong, and I remember being in the audience. It was almost like a spiritual experience, like watching—it was amazing!"

Oxendine also said he researched the role mainly by talking with the Lumbee elders. During his first two years of participation in the play, Oxendine played Boss Strong, a member of the gang and one of Henry's closest friends.

As legend has it, the band of men led by Henry retaliated against those he believed killed his brother and father in a house raid. This event led to the "Lowrie War." The play is set during the Civil War as Henry Berry Lowrie and his brothers hid in the Robeson County swamps to avoid Confederate forced labor in salt mines and at Fort Fischer. The gang would raid houses for supplies and weapons and share with those in need.

"I love it because Henry Berry Lowrie—what he stood for was so much bigger than I can explain. You had this man who was fighting for the poor, for all his people. He was like a Robin Hood figure. He had a group at that the time during the Civil War of Native Americans, blacks and whites, and they were all fighting for a common purpose. So, he's a hero. He was revolutionary! And playing roles like this are the things you dream of, especially when as a kid growing up hearing of this legend and, getting the opportunity to try and step into his shoes. It's just— It's the things you dream of," Oxendine said.

Oxendine said the most challenging part of playing this role is the physical because it's a central role.

"There's a lot of physical work with this character because you're constantly on stage. And I definitely have to prepare my body physically, to be able to dance and for stage combat. It's a very taxing role on the body. So just staying in physical shape for one thing and the rest of it. And really just being open is the best preparation. I can say being open to try anything that's thrown at me at rehearsal when the director wants me to try something new. Or if my acting partner is giving me something to work with is different than usual, just you know, don't resist it, just go with it and try and find anything that comes."

Oxendine said that in "Strike," he has set lines to recite but the flexibility to interpret the script.

"Finding how the character does relate to me in my everyday life, because the scripts a blueprint, and the director, he gives us like everything we need to put on to performance. But being able to relate it more to myself and finding these new things really helps me – I wouldn't say I enjoy the experience more, but I gain more from it. And it's really one of the best things

about taking on this role, or any role in general, is just discovering all the different things about yourself that you never realized were there.”

Oxendine said that Director Jonathan Drahos is lenient in letting actors discover things and try and explore different things and improvise. But if he doesn't like it, he'll tell you that, you know, 'cut it out.'" At first, he said that taking constructive criticism was challenging.

"When you start out, I think, for me, it definitely is (difficult) because your job is to be vulnerable. And like, you've got someone judging you—like whether this is good or not. And a part of that will always be there. Yeah, but I've been learning not to take things like that personal and just whatever criticism he gives me, or any director, it's for the best," Oxendine said. Drahos and Oxendine share mutual respect.

"He's one of the students that have come through the program that really steeped himself in the training of what it means to be an actor. He was a star student. He really came into his own and learned a great deal and particularly excelled in Shakespeare. And if you can do Shakespeare, you can do anything! This particular role he has played for the last three years, I believe. And, you know, it's very close to him. And his community. And the great thing about him in the role is that he has people very close to him, surrounding him: his brother Wyvis, Mother Denise and sister Wynona. It's interesting because Nona used to play Rhoda and Matthew Jacobs played Henry for a couple of years. And then I cast Billy, and of course you can't have Billy and his sister playing opposite. So, I cast Cheyenne (Ward) as Rhoda and Cheyenne and Billy have become very close outside of the play. And so, I think he's got a great support network around him," Drahos said.

"And he's playing this iconic role with the utmost respect for the legend of Henry Berry Lowrie, but also with the intent of uplifting the community and not just of the Lumbee people but of all races because Henry was focused on bringing people together from diverse backgrounds. And so I think Billy understands that this kind of role is important for our moment now and for our community now and for generations to come. I think he's building a good legacy with the role and I hope it continues for however long he wants to do it," said Drahos, the Director of Theatre at UNCP.

Oxendine appeared in "Lumbee Land," filmed in Robeson County a month ago. He played the protagonist in that film named "Dollar."

"I would say that he (Oxendine) brought a combination of strength and vulnerability to the role that exceeded our already very high expectations. And he stood among the very best of this group of incredibly hard-working, experienced people, both in front of the camera and behind it," said Malinda Maynor Lowery, Executive Producer and Writer. She said "Lumbee Land" should be released by the end of the year.

Oxendine also played various roles in "Shakespeare in the Pines" in Pinehurst, staged by the Uprising Theatre Company of Carolanne Marano and Jonathan Drahos. Additionally, he has been working in various roles with the Actors Studio in New York.

"I would say some things that I've discovered on a very personal level with these roles. It's like how I express my emotions to different people, because in certain roles, you'll have characters who are very closed off and aren't very good at expressing themselves to others. I've noticed

that I sometimes struggle to express my love to others in a verbal way, especially. I played a character here (Actor's Studio), a character who did not know how to express his love to others in a healthy way," Oxendine said.

He continues to learn and grow through the character explorations of his craft. He has even considered his long-term goal and concluded, "I just want to live comfortably doing what I love, which is acting."

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