

Miss Cora Story brought vividly to life by local dramatic artist

By KIM HAMILTON

"Life itself is dependent upon the ability to read and write," said Laura Lee Duncan in the premiere dramatic interpretation of "Miss Cora," the story of Cora Wilson Stewart, founder of the nation's adult literacy movement.

The play, depicting a portion of life of the woman who headed the first Moonlight School project was presented to a crowded audience Friday, Sept. 7, at Morehead State University's Button Auditorium.

Morehead native Duncan, MSU's artist-in-residence, and Michael O'Connell brilliantly conveyed Cora's story through their acting expertise 79 years and two days after the first moonlight school session was held in Rowan County on Sept. 5, 1911.

The name Moonlight School came about because adults could not attend until after they ceased working late in the evenings. They depended upon the moon to light their paths to greater knowledge.

An original play, researched and written by Duncan and O'Connell, captivated the audience, whisking it back to the early 1900s, the era of Cora's young life.

Cora was a teacher who cared deeply about the plight of the Appalachian people, many of whom were "born into" illiteracy, she said.

In the show's introduction,

Duncan recited many of Wilson's feelings about how the Appalachian way of life was artistic in itself, yet the people of the area were so poor and so illiterate that they could not interpret that art.

"Yes, the poor of the mountains have been wounded but not crushed," said Duncan as Cora.

Later, after talking to different townfolk, finding out that illiteracy was prevalent among many, Cora decided she would try to help the adult community to learn to read and write. Many wanted just to be able to read letters from loved ones who had moved away.

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Duncan and O'Connell light up the stage with their performance of Miss Cora. The set was designed by area folk artist Sam McKinney, accompanying music was played by The White Horse String Band, and costumes were designed by Patty Lambert. (Photo by Kim Hamilton)

Miss Cora Story

(Continued from page one)

"Illiteracy should be fought with the fervor of war," said Cora, and she began to make plans for her adult education project.

She met with much opposition as she visited residents throughout the county. One woman Cora visited (as depicted in the play), told Cora that she had children and too much work to tend to and did not have time to go to school.

But on the bright moonlit night of Sept. 5, 1911, in Rowan County, only 150 students were expected to attend the first meetings of the 50 Moonlight Schools, a surprising 1,200 men and women came.

Student ages ranged from 18 to 86 years.

"It was the brightest moonlit night the world has ever seen," Cora is quoted as saying.

About the actors

The multi-talented Duncan gave a strong performance as she played every female character in the play, from the dedicated Cora to the comical character of a brusque woman with children hanging all over her.

O'Connell's talent also shone brightly as he played all the male characters and sang a familiar solo folk tune entitled "In The Pines."

Both actors studied oral interpretation at Eastern Michigan University, where Duncan earned numerous national honors, including the 1987 Outstanding Performer in the United States, the highest honor accorded a collegiate performer.

She had also created one-woman productions based on the works of women poets, including June Jordan and Nikki Giovanni.

The 26-year old Duncan brought her stunning one-woman performance to MSU last summer when she performed Jordan's works entitled "From Sea to Shining Sea," where she also interpreted several different characters.

This seems to be one of Duncan's many strong points.

She is the daughter of two MSU education faculty mem-

bers, Dr. John R. and Mrs. Gretta Duncan.

John played Principal Robinson in the introduction of the show.

When asked what she thought about having such a talented daughter, Gretta said, "I'm extremely proud of her and I always knew she was special. Her father and I were always such practical people and when we gave birth to such a butterfly, it was difficult to understand her for a long time.

"But we've attempted to support her in her endeavors and not let that butterfly die," she said.

Gretta says she credits much of her daughter's talent to the nurturing she received in the drama department at Breckinridge Training School, where Duncan attended and graduated the last class before it was merged with Rowan County school system.

O'Connell studied at Eastern Michigan, also where he was two-time national champion in competitive performance and one of the nation's top 10 collegiate performers.

He has developed a musical Vaudeville show which he performs in theaters across the country.

O'Connell and Duncan met at college and have dated for nine years, they said.

At the reception after the performance, Duncan spotted O'Connell across the room. She walked over to him, and kissing him, said, "I miss you, I haven't seen you during this whole show!"

They both were so busy writing and memorizing parts that they hardly had time for each other.

They hope to travel as a performing duo, taking their shows nationwide.

"All my life I knew I wanted to be an actress and performing live is what I like doing best," said Duncan.

She and O'Connell will give an evening performance of Miss Cora on Friday, Oct. 5 at 8 p.m. in Duncan Recital Hall at the



Pictured talking to Laura Lee Duncan, writer and actress in the Miss Cora story, are some relatives of the late Cora Wilson Stewart. From left, Duncan, Laura Beth Bradley, grand-niece, Robert Bradley, husband of Cora's niece, Jerry Wilson Bradley, and David Bradley, grand-

nephew. They gave a letter to Duncan that was written to Cora around the year 1919 from an A.J. Palmer, he wrote, "Their is only one condition of mankind worse than slavery — ignorance." (Photo by Kim Hamilton)

FEATURE OF THE WEEK

Duncan's talent 'apparent' as 'Miss Cora'

By ELAINE WEBB
Campus Life Editor

"Miss Cora," an interpretative performance based on the life of Cora Wilson Stewart, founder of the Moonlight School Movement, premiered in Button Auditorium, Friday, Sept. 7.

The play, created by Artist in Residence Laura Lee Duncan, depicted the personal struggles and triumphs Miss Cora experienced as she fought to educate illiterate adults.

"Miss Cora is one of the first dramatic productions to illustrate the literacy movement of the early 1900's. As such, it is an original and vital depiction of our Appalachian heritage," says Dr. John C. Philley, Dean of College Arts and Sciences at Morehead State University.

Laura Lee Duncan, who was named Outstanding Performer of the United States in 1987, the highest possible honor for a collegiate, played the title role with convincing perfection.



(Left) Laura Duncan portraying "Miss Cora" reads to her counterpart Michael O'Connell playing one of his many different faces at a special performance of the production last Friday in Button Auditorium.

Photo by Kevin Owens

Duncan's multi-faceted talent was apparent as she singly performed all female characters in the play, from the title role to an elderly lady wanting to learn to read because she couldn't read her daughter's letters.

Michael O'Connell performed equally well as he played all male roles in the production, including a singing role.

The actors were showcased in sets designed by Sam McKinney and costumes by Patty Lambert. The set and costumes helped provide the look and feel of the early 1900's, while serving fundamental roles in the realistic artistic concept of the play.

Also aiding in creating the period atmosphere, was the outstanding musical performance of the White Horse String Band, whose members include Dr. Ron Dobler, Dr. Gene Young, Mary Nell Young, Sandy Knipp, and Steve Rigsby.

Duncan and O'Connell received a well deserved standing ovation at the close of the production.

Immediately after the play, Duncan was presented with a Kentucky Colonelcy commission from a representative of the governor's office.

Play 'Cora' looks at life of pioneer in education

By Tom Carter
Herald-Leader staff writer

Nowadays, literacy and an improved education system are banner issues in Kentucky.

But nearly four decades ago, Rowan County's Cora Wilson Stewart and her "moonlight school" for adults brought those issues from the mountains to the White House.

The life and work of Stewart, who isn't mentioned in many Kentucky history books, is the basis for a theatrical presentation called *Miss Cora*. Actress Laura Lee Duncan will present it for the first time today at Morehead State University. Saturday is International Literacy Day.

"The play is the story of the moments leading up to the evening of the first moonlight school," said Duncan, 25, who will take the show on a statewide tour of more than 70 performances.

"That first night, 10 or 12 people were expected to show up, but 1,200 people came from the county and from the 50 area day schools."

Duncan is a Rowan County native. She developed the performance piece based on her longtime interest in the Cora Wilson Stewart story.

Stewart was a Rowan County school superintendent in the early 1900s. After founding the first moonlight school for adult education, she



Herald-Leader/Tim Sharp

Laura Lee Duncan and Michael O'Connell wrote and star in *Miss Cora*, the Cora Wilson Stewart story.

went on to lead the U.S. literacy program under President Herbert Hoover and to head the World Conference on Literacy.

Duncan and fellow actor Michael O'Connell wrote the show. Both portray several characters.

Miss Cora also involves a presentation of slides from the time period and music by the White Horse String Band.

In his pictorial history of Eastern Kentucky, author Stuart Sprague includes photographs of a session of a moonlight school, so called because classes were held on moonlit nights so adults could find their way to the schoolhouse. The photographs show adults squeezed behind child-size desks.

"She transformed a purely local

effort into an international movement," Sprague wrote of Stewart.

"To be able to write meant the ability to correspond with loved ones. To read meant not being such an easy mark in business transactions."

Stewart, born in the Farmers community of Rowan County in 1875, wrote several primers for adults.

Actress Duncan is a graduate of Eastern Michigan State University. *Miss Cora* is not her first original theatrical work. She also has developed performance programs about female poets, including June Jordan and Nikki Giovanni.

As an actress, Duncan said, her interest lies in non-traditional work.

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Cora

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Her forte, she said, is "a more open performance that involves poetry and art."

"Cora Wilson Stewart is kind of a local heroine. But I didn't know many details about her life because she was also a controversial figure in the community," Duncan said, noting that Cora Wilson Stewart was ostracized in her lifetime because she didn't assume the traditional woman's role. She also was divorced twice.

"She was a real leader in the community, but naturally, when you are a leader, gossip goes along with it," Duncan said.

The original moonlight school, the Little Brushy Schoolhouse, has been restored and is now on the Morehead campus.

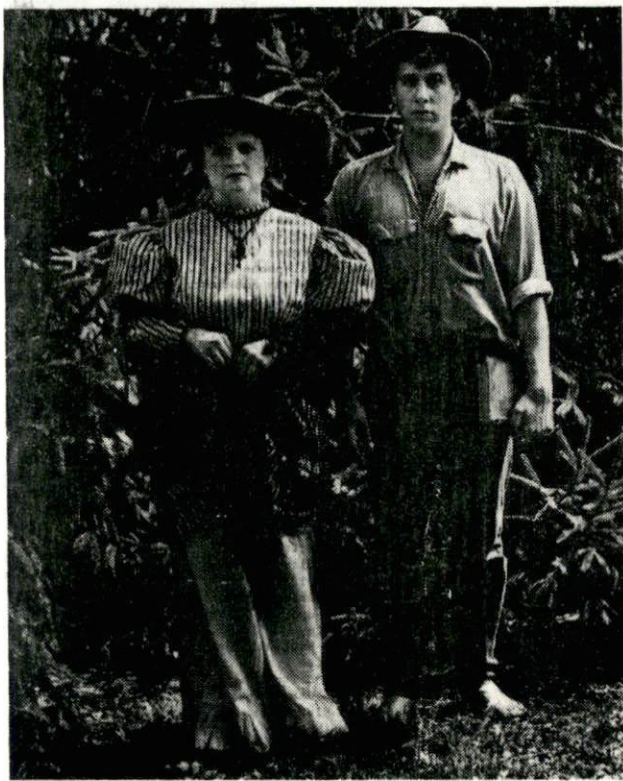
In support of *Miss Cora*, Duncan has received a \$10,000 personal growth grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women.

Miss Cora will have its premiere today at 7 p.m. in Morehead's Button Auditorium.

Other scheduled performances include a presentation Monday in Louisville at the annual conference of the Kentucky Literacy Commission.

Duncan and O'Connell also are making the presentation available free to schools and community organizations. She has received money from various businesses and corporations, including the Bank of Morehead, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Lexington Herald-Leader.

For additional information about the performance, call Duncan at (606) 783-2793.



Miss Cora's story

"Miss Cora," the Moonlight Lady, an interpretive production based on the life of the founder of the nation's adult literacy movement, will premiere in Morehead State University's Button Auditorium at 1 p.m. Friday, Sept. 7. Set in the early 1900s, the show features the talents of Morehead native Laura Lee Duncan, left, with Michael O'Connell in the male roles. Created by Duncan, "Miss Cora" is available for performances at schools and community organizations. Booking information is available by calling Duncan, MSU performing artist-in-residence, at (606) 783-2793.

Play about Cora Stewart's life premieres on Sept. 7

"Miss Cora," the Moonlight Lady, an interpretive production based on the life of the woman who founded the nation's adult literacy movement, will have its premiere performance at 1 p.m. Friday, Sept. 7, in Button Auditorium at Morehead State University.

Created by Morehead native Laura Lee Duncan, "Miss Cora" offers a glimpse into the personal struggle of Cora Wilson Stewart as she worked to establish and maintain the Moonlight School program for illiterate adults.

Her program, which was launched Sept. 5, 1911, in Rowan County, became a model for other states and Miss Cora gained international prominence in the literacy movement. But, according to Duncan, Miss Cora's commitment to helping improve the educational lot of adults was accompanied by personal sacrifices.

"She had a child die in infancy, was divorced twice at a time when society did not condone divorce and was partially ostracized by the community because she was not assuming the traditional woman's role," Duncan said. "I want to provide an insight into this side of her life as well as her heroic efforts to provide an education to Kentucky's adults.

Free and open to the public, the premiere performance will feature Duncan, MSU's performing artist-in-residence, and

Michael O'Connell with music by the White Horse String Band. A multi-media production, the premiere also will feature a sculpture installation by regional artist Sam McKinney. A reception will follow the production.

Monday, Sept. 10, "Miss Cora" will be presented in Louisville at the annual conference of the Kentucky Literacy Commission. Duncan and her colleague also plan to make the production available at no charge to schools and community organizations. Booking information is available from Duncan, Performing Artist-in-Residence, Cora Wilson Stewart Moonlight School Project, Morehead State University, Radar Hall 205, Morehead, KY 40351-1689.

Morehead State University not only is home to the Moonlight School Project, but also to Stewart's original Moonlight School building which has been restored and moved to the campus.

While studying oral interpretation at Eastern Michigan University, Duncan earned numerous national honors, including the 1987 Outstanding Performer in the United States, the highest honor accorded a collegiate performer. She has also created one-woman productions based on the works of women poets, including June Jordan and Nikki Giovanni. Duncan is the daughter of two MSU education faculty members, Dr. and Mrs.

John R. Duncan.

O'Connell also studied at Eastern Michigan, where he was two-time national champion in competitive performance and one of the nation's top 10 collegiate performers. He has developed a musical vaudeville show which he performs in theaters across the country.

Duncan, who has long been fascinated by the Cora Wilson Stewart story, began her research for the production

earlier this year with funding support from several agencies, including the Citizens Bank of Morehead, Investor's Heritage Life Insurance Company, Kentucky Department of Education, Kentucky Foundation for Women, Kentucky Humanities Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Kentucky Oral History Commission, *Lexington Herald-Leader*, and the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity, state Department of Education.

THE TRAIL BLAZER

Wednesday, September 5, 1990



Laura Lee Duncan (Miss Cora) and Michael O'Connell perform "Miss Cora the Moonlight Lady"
Photo by Eric Shindelhoffer

Adult literacy pioneer commemorated in play

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Morehead State University **Update** The Newsletter for MSU Faculty and Staff

"Miss Cora" to premiere

"Miss Cora," the Moonlight Lady, an interpretive production based on the life of the woman who founded the nation's adult literacy movement, will have its premiere performance on Friday, Sept. 7, at 1 p.m. in Button Auditorium.

The struggle of Cora Wilson Stewart as she worked to establish and maintain the Moonlight School program is the subject of this program created by Laura Duncan of Morehead.

Free and open to the public, the premiere performance will feature Duncan, MSU's artist-in-residence, and Michael O'Connell with music by the White Horse String Band. A sculpture presentation by regional artist Sam McKinney also will be part of the event, with a reception to follow the production.

One-woman performance will benefit MSU scholarship fund

By DEIDRE GLASSER

If Dustin Hoffaman prove a father be a better mother than a mother

If Dustin Hoffaman prove a man be a better woman than a woman

When do she get to see a Betterman than Hoffaman?

Confused? Intrigued? Maybe it's the unconventional style of poet June Jordan. That's what caught the creative eye of Morehead native Laura Lee Duncan when she decided to use Jordan's poetry as the script for her one-woman show.

Just as Jordan details two of the many characters associated with Dustin Hoffaman, so too will Duncan interpret several characters created by Jordan.

From Jewish cafe worker to a Russian immigrant to the freedom fighter in Nicaragua, Duncan incorporates people from around the world into her act, but, as she said, "The characters created by June Jordan are interesting, in the fact that they are everyone's characters since everyone can identify with them. It

doesn't matter if you've never even met a Guatamalen child, the problems that that child is going through can be interpreted as everyone's problem."

The inspiration for Duncan's production came from oral interpretation courses

If you go

Laura Lee Duncan will present "From Sea to Shining Sea" on June 15-16 at 8 p.m. in the Kibbey Theatre, located in MSU's Combs Building.

she took while a student at Eastern Michigan University. In her classes Duncan was encouraged to find, research, interpret and perform selections of personal significance.

While rummaging through a book store, Duncan came across the unusual poetry of Juned Jordan who wrote about, "The emergency of things happening all around the globe."

But what Duncan liked the most was the fact that she gave a voice to those whom we don't usually hear from. Instead of trying to

"Fabricate characters for the Broadway theaters with velvet seats, she's working to understand the complex life of people who are living simply."

These are the characters that Duncan performed in her premiere appearance this past April in Covington at Northern Kentucky University. While there she had the honor of meeting Jordan and also performing Jordan's work for her.

However, Duncan first performed Jordan's poetry in the National College speech tournament, while at Eastern Michigan, and in 1987 won first place best speaker in the U.S. overall.

The people she performed for enjoyed it so much that Duncan decided to work up an entire repertoire of Jordan character. When selecting the nearly 30 poems for their production, Duncan looked for poems that, "Showed the anger of everyday people through irony, symbolism, or even a rap or blues song," she explained.

In order to create the characters, Duncan literally took to the streets. She remembered, "Going to the seediest parts of Newport

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Laura Duncan will give two performances of her one-woman show entitled, "From Sea to Shining Sea," June 15-16 at 8 p.m. in MSU's Kibbey Theater.

Morehead
State University

Update

The Newsletter for MSU Faculty and Staff

Laura Duncan will develop special project

Morehead native Laura Lee Duncan has begun a very special oral history project—creating a one-woman show to depict the life and influence of Cora Wilson Stewart, founder of the nation's adult literacy movement.

Working under the sponsorship of Morehead State University's College of Arts and Sciences as principal writer/performer for the "Moonlight School Project," Duncan will research, write and appear in the production.

Of particular interest to Kentucky and especially Eastern Kentucky, the project already is attracting support outside of the campus. Duncan earlier this month received a \$2,000 check from the Investors Heritage Life Insurance Company for the project.

Other grants have included one for \$1,790 to the Office of Regional Development Services from the Kentucky Oral History Commission which will enable Duncan to produce approximately 30 oral histories related to the Moonlight School and Stewart's impact upon the literacy movement. She also received funds from the Citizens Bank of Morehead.

The production will focus on Stewart's work to improve the educational lot of Eastern Kentucky adults by conducting classes in community schools at night, a move that began in Rowan County in 1911 and spread throughout the nation.

Stewart later became what would be considered today the equivalent of U.S. Secretary of Education. The building housing Stewart's original "Moonlight School" has been restored and moved to MSU's campus.

"Morehead State is proud to be a part of this endeavor which not only will tell the story of a determined and courageous Eastern Kentucky woman, but also will reinforce the importance of education in our lives," said MSU President C. Nelson Grote. "It is a story that needs to be told and one that our region should take pride in."

"Dynamic women who have been able to effect change and those ahead of their time—especially those from Eastern Kentucky—hold a fascination for me," Duncan said. "Having begun her work here in Rowan County, Cora Stewart is even of more interest to me," she added.

"I would also like to encourage anyone with stories about the early Moonlight School program or memorabilia from those schools to contact me at my office," Duncan said. Her office is located in Rader Hall 204. Telephone: 2793.

Duncan also recently received a nearly \$10,000 professional growth grant as an emerging artist from the Kentucky Foundation for Women.

While studying oral interpretation at Eastern Michigan University, Duncan earned numerous national honors, including the National Forensics Pentathlon Award as the Best Collegiate Performer as well as first place in poetry interpretation.

She has created other one-woman productions, based on the works of women poets, including those of June Jordan and Nikki Giovanni.

Duncan plans to offer the production as a possible program for regional arts groups, rural school systems and women's organizations.

Tentative plans call for her production to premier on International Literacy Day, Sept. 8, at MSU, with invitations to be guests of honor extended to the first ladies of the nation and commonwealth, Barbara Bush and Martha Wilkinson, both of whom are committed to eliminating illiteracy.

Duncan is the daughter of two MSU education faculty members, Dr. and Mrs. John R. Duncan.

One-woman

(Continued from page one)

Kentucky, wandering downtown Cincinnati by the river, listening in foodstamp lines, because I was looking for the souls of people whose lives revolved around similar 'emergency situations' as the poetry deals with."

After character evolution there were several other details for which Duncan was responsible. From costuming to lighting to set blocking to musical improvising, Duncan is responsible for it all. As she explains, "that's why it's called a one-woman show! However, I've had a lot of support from other people, too."

In all, she is unsure how long it actually took to create the entire production, especially since she is constantly adding to it. "I'd say I think about what the show is about every 15 seconds, whether I am planting wild flowers or just taking a walk, something around me takes me back to the poem," she said.

"I am interested in theater that is mobile; that is, it can be performed in the streets, in a barn, walking on a nature trail or even in your basement. Especially, I don't want the audience to be sedentary. My performances strive to be symbolic instead of giving everything to the audience like TV. To give them a chance to let their imaginations go wild."

During the second act, Duncan changes costumes and begins to perform another author's work. This time Chris Llewelyn's characters transform the small Kibbey stage into the 1911 Triangle Shirt Waist Company. Duncan's second act performance details the emotions of the women and children who worked at the factory and were killed in a tragic fire there.

In the poetry, Llewelyn, also a female writer, creates characters who speak out against the poor conditions of the factory and condemn the dictatorial control of the company bosses, who apparently had locked the elevators and barred the windows in order to prevent union organizers from entering the factory. Such behavior ultimately caused the deaths of 146 women and children.

"The interesting thing about this historical account is that it personifies what the first act talks about, people struggling with life and discrimination," Duncan said.

"I want to represent the victims and underdogs and allow their voices to finally be heard."

Since many of the workers were immigrants, Duncan must perform many different accents.

"From Sea to Shining Sea," one of Jordan's poems, is the title of the entire production and ties each poem or dramatic monologue together. The set features clotheslines draped with different human forms which symbolically illustrate the universality of the poetry and the performance itself.

All proceeds from Duncan's performances will go to the Julia Doyel Memorial Scholarship fund in order eventually to endow it at a \$10,000 level.

According to Harlen Hamm, associate professor of speech, communications at MSU, "The interest from the principal will yield approximately \$1,000 annually for an MSU speech scholarship," named in honor of the late speech coach and MSU faculty member Julia Webb.

Hamm added, "Mrs. Webb was a marvelous speech coach. She had a genuine concern for her student's growth, welfare and improvement."

Hamm said the scholarship's significance is to take advantage of the university's speech program, a program which Webb was a crucial member from 1964-1973.

Hamm, along with Dr. James Quisenberry, chairman of the scholarship committee, decided Duncan would be an excellent benefit performer. Duncan readily agreed, saying, "I am so happy about performing in my home town and also to advance the speech program at Morehead State University. I know especially how beneficial scholarship money can be."

Presently, the memorial fund has about \$2,820, but Hamm said that along with the Duncan performance an antique art auction has been planned for mid-November. "Maybe then, we will have reached the \$10,000 principal," he said.

In the meantime, Duncan is preparing her set daily and leaves by saying, "come and support the Julia Doyel Webb Scholarship, but also come see the hometown girl goin' good!"

Maybe someday, that hometown girl will not only interpret poems about Dustin Hoffman, but will also work along side him.