

# 'Shades of Gray'

Playwright-actor Tom Dugan hopes show challenges what people thought they knew

BY ROY PROCTOR  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Los Angeles-based actor-playwright Tom Dugan spent three years crafting his one-man play "Robert E. Lee — Shades of Gray," which will have its world premiere Saturday at the Carpenter Center.

"It didn't take quite as long as the Civil War," Dugan says by phone from his home in the San Fernando Valley.

"But close."

The two-hour, two-act play, which includes taped period music and projected period photographs, is set on April 9, 1865, as the Confederate commander waits alone in Wilmer McLean's parlor in Appomattox to surrender his Army of Northern Virginia to U.S. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

Dugan, whose résumé bristles with TV

and film roles, is no stranger to the one-man show.

He's been performing another solo effort, "Confessions of a Swordfish" (named for the first character he played as a professional actor), off and on for four years.

"Artistically, a one-man show is probably the most difficult thing an actor can do," says Dugan, who is 42.

"It's not just an actor by himself on the stage, but a matter of the buck really stopping with the actor and the playwright, which are both me.

"Professionally, a one-man show is also a bit of insurance that I will be able to provide my own employment."

Dugan, who grew up in New Jersey, happened upon Lee from the purest of motives.

"I've always been interested in the Civil War, and I wanted to choose a subject that I thought would be popular," he says. "The Civil War is obviously a very popular subject not only in the United States but throughout the world.

"Out of all the one-man shows out there, I was surprised to learn that none had ever

been written about Lee, at least not one I've heard of. When I began to research Lee, I got excited about how complex, fascinating and uplifting his story is.

"Before the research began, I knew of the Civil War what most Americans who grew up in the North know, a cartoon version of history that boiled down to the North being good and the South being bad.

"When I read about Lee, I saw all the gray areas — economics, slavery, politics. And I was very excited to have the opportunity as a playwright to challenge audi-

## ROBERT E. LEE — SHADES OF GRAY

WHEN: 8 p.m.  
Saturday, 2 p.m.  
next Sunday

WHERE:  
Carpenter Center,  
600 E. Grace St.

TICKETS:  
\$37-\$39.50

INFO:  
(804) 262-8100

ences against what they think they know," Dugan says.

"Fictionalized history teaches later generations to long for the good old days which never really were and to despise the little good that is granted us in this present world," Lee says in my play.

"That's a paraphrase of something Lee wrote to his son, and it's the main thrust of the piece. We, as an audience, can't know who we are until we know where we were. Most people can relate to what Lee is going through, although Lee's life was on a much grander scale.

"The compromises, the failed attempts, the personal successes that are shown in the play are reflected in anyone's life."

What Dugan and his New Mexico-based producer, Ralph Pavone, didn't take into account when they chose the former capital of the Confederacy for their world premiere was the controversy the barest mention of Lee can cause.

"I didn't realize how polarizing Lee is in Richmond," Dugan says. "I was surprised to hear of the defacing of a [floodwall] mural showing Lee in Richmond and of controversies over how Civil War generals are portrayed. I would never write or perform

in any play that I thought would be offensive to anyone, and I still think Richmond is the perfect place to start.

"I'm even excited over the possible controversy, but I realize now that I'm not going to please everybody. People who want to see Lee either as a saint or as a devil are not going to be pleased.

"Personally, I cannot think of a more exemplary human being than Robert E. Lee, but I can't relate to a saint, and I don't think an audience can, either. All the generals in this show are portrayed as human beings with faults."

Dugan sent an early draft of his play to a black director friend, Mel Johnson Jr., to get feedback.

"When I read the script, I understood that Tom was doing a good job of presenting factual information and allowing us to see parts of Robert E. Lee that aren't general knowledge," says Johnson, who agreed to stage the show.

"I can understand why things are polarized in Richmond. Slavery is always a hotbed issue. But I liked the way the way Tom was trying to show us a fuller picture of who Lee was."

After next weekend's two Richmond performances, the production will be sidetracked until October, when it will resurface in the Clay Center in Charleston, W. Va.

"Robert E. Lee — Shades of Gray" is scheduled to tour after that.

• Contact Roy Proctor at (804) 649-6733 or rproctor@timesdispatch.com

March 10, 2008

Ralph Pavone  
Ralph Pavone Productions  
7553 Mackenzie Dr, N.E.  
Rio Rancho, NM 87144-8416

Dear Ralph:

We were very pleased to present the premiere performances of "Robert E. Lee, Shades of Gray" this past April. I was quite impressed with the work of the writer and actor, Tom Dugan, who brought this one-man show to life in our 2,000 auditorium.

The show was a balanced examination of a major historical figure supported by music and photos of the Civil War. Mr. Dugan has a strong presence on the stage and is a convincing Robert E. Lee.

The show was a success in many different ways: the set was well-designed and easy to load in, the audience was held absolutely silent for both acts, and the rousing standing ovation at the end confirmed Mr. Dugan has created a winner.

We had many high school students in attendance and the history teachers applauded the effort as well. Confederate reenactors enlivened the evening outside and inside the theater.

I have been highly recommending this attraction to my colleagues. Thank you very much for producing the show and allowing us to kick it off.

Best regards,

Joel Katz  
Executive Director  
Carpenter Center, Richmond VA

# QUAD CITY ARTS



1715 2nd Avenue  
Rock Island, IL 61201  
(309) 793-1213 • fax 793-1265

February 22, 2008

Tom Dugan  
5341 Overing Dr.  
Woodland Hills CA 91367

Dear Tom:

Your January 15-27, 2007 Visiting Artist Series residency was a great success, and I'd like to thank you for coming to us. We sent you to quite the variety of outreach sites we had you visit, and you rose to the challenge of giving a meaningful presentation everywhere you went, from private and public elementaries, junior high, and high schools, service clubs and several community colleges. The outreach activities really helped community members get an inside view of the workings of an original one-man show, and were a great enhancement to the full-length production.

I especially remember how the residents at Friendship Manor retirement center enjoyed interacting with you and sharing their impressions of history over time. I thought it was very effective how when working with adults, you asked them to think of events in their lifetimes which may be changed or edited by the time they are written into the history books. It really tied well into your own view of the Civil War as you described it, and especially the life of Robert E. Lee. Students at Arrowhead Ranch had a morning session in which you brought history to life for these troubled youth. It was great to have Mel Johnson Jr. join you for the second week, especially for the three-hour workshop for area teachers. The educators really enjoyed the chance to talk about strategies for using drama in the classroom. A group discussion for at Quad City Arts the night before the full performance allowed the public to learn more about the development of your portrayal of Robert E. Lee, as well as discuss some of the historical research you undertook in writing the play. Each session included time for audience questions, and when time permitted, it was great that you stayed after to talk to individuals. The public performance at the Capitol Theatre in Davenport, IA drew a crowd of 600 – many attending a Quad City Arts event for the first time. The fully-staged version of *Robert E. Lee: Shades of Grey*, completed with projected images, sound effects and music, blew the audience away. I'm sure you remember the standing ovation, and we received so many glowing comments from audience members. I was excited by how many stayed to meet you after the performance – it was an exciting evening for all.

For many people in our community, the Visiting Artist Series is their only opportunity to experience performers whose talent is nationally recognized. Your three-times-a day residency performances really had an impact on the Quad Cities. Through 27 performances and outreach activities, you reached more than 4,741 Quad City residents. I'd gladly recommend you to any presenter looking for a performer who can really make history come alive.

I've enclosed a full set of news clippings, programs and study guides, as well as photocopies of the site evaluations we've received. I've also included a disk with photos I took during the outreach performances. Best wishes and I look forward to seeing you again.

Susan Wahlmann  
Performing Arts & Arts-in-Education Director

*We are where you work... We are where you play... We are where you learn...*

Ralph Pavone Productions  
7553 Mackenzie Dr NE  
Rio Rancho, New Mexico  
87144-8416

January 19, 2006

Dear Ralph,

Please pardon the delay in writing this letter. It is best that some time has past since our October 27<sup>th</sup> presentation of *Robert E. Lee: Shades of Gray*. I now have a better perspective from which I can say, Thank You. Tom Dugan's residency at the Townsend Center was the beginning of our most successful season in over a decade.

The week began with the master classes that Tom taught for the theatre and music majors. His presentations captivated the students, especially the career session. I appreciate his work at the Carrollton Senior Center as well. He had a tough crowd, hungry senior citizens that wondered why he wasn't born in Virginia. Tom earned their applause.

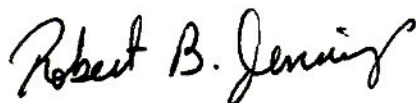
I knew when we brought General Lee to Carrollton we must create a special event for patrons to spend time with him. I am grateful you agreed to our idea of Tom hosting *Supper with the General*. What a night! The dinner was a complete sellout. Not only was it a terrific fund raiser, but the patrons loved it. I am still getting requests to bring back the General to host another supper. Tom is genuine, warm and friendly with absolute strangers. His talk after the meal was superb. I wish all artists understood the needs of presenters so well. Tom really made a lasting impression in our community.

And the show, a complete sellout down to the last seat. I was truly amazed. *Robert E. Lee: Shades of Gray* extended our market well beyond our normal reach. It expanded our patronage by more than two hundred new customers. I am still amazed, even shocked, at the overwhelming intensity of the play. The emotional impact that Dugan delivers to the audience is stunning – for entire scenes, not a sound. Young and old, Dugan carried the audience on his every word, each phrase more intense than the one before.

Finally, at the height of the play, as the tension grew to a gut wrenching level, you could feel the crowd around you – deep in thought, filled with anguish and pity, yearning for resolution. Tom and I had discussed at length who in the audience would be touched the most. He had told me, but I did not believe him. Sitting on my favorite row with my family around me, I could hear crying in the audience, softly choking back tears that no one expected. It began slowly in the middle and spread to others across the dark theatre. I listened carefully as I watched General Lee and scanned the audience. Tom was right. Scattered about the room, maybe a dozen or so, were men who knew all to well the horrors of war - soldiers in our midst, deeply moved by one man telling a profound story of love and devotion, loss and grief. It was a humbling experience.

From the opening line to the final sounds of stomping boots, the play held everyone in suspense. *Shades of Gray* well deserved the standing ovation from a breathless audience that cheered Dugan for minutes as a young girl brought flowers to the stage.

All the best,



Robert B. Jennings