

# DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

## *The Old Settler* Director's Interview

By Jacqueline Lawton

John Henry Redwood's *The Old Settler* tells the story of Elizabeth and Quilly, two sisters who share an apartment in Harlem in 1943. Amid the glamour and jazz of the famous Savoy Ballroom, the uncertainty and hope of the Great Migration and the brilliant artistry of the Harlem Renaissance, these sisters learn new lessons about love and discover the true meaning of forgiveness. Prior to the start of rehearsals, I had an opportunity to speak with director Walter Dallas. *The Old Settler* will be in performance at The University of Maryland's Kogod Theatre from February 10-18, 2012.

**Jacqueline Lawton:** *To begin, can you tell me how long have you been directing?*

**Walter Dallas:** I can't remember when I wasn't directing! If you were to ask a professional basketball player when he started playing, he would probably tell you the same thing. As far back as I can remember, growing up in Atlanta, I was always performing in plays in school, and putting on plays for neighborhood children. I vividly recall a version of puppet shows with empty Coke bottles as actors; the scripts, voices, action, choreography, sound effects, stage combat, sets and costumes, etc all done by me. I was a big hit; even now some of those children-now-seniors remind me of those "good-ol' days," and the anecdotes usually end with, "...and you still doin' it! Still puttin' on them plays!"

**JL:** *Why did you decide to get into theater? Was there someone who inspired you?*

**WD:** As I said before, I was always "into" theatre. In elementary as well as high school and college, I was very involved, primarily as an actor, in theatre. In 1968, as a senior at Morehouse College, I directed my first play in a course at Spelman College being taught by legendary director, Baldwin Burroughs. "Bee," as he was affectionately called, was a Yale graduate and was being visited one very early Saturday morning by Constance Welch, Head of the Directing Program at The Yale School of Drama. To make a long story short, after she watched the performance of the one-act play I had directed, she offered me, on the spot, one of the six slots for the fall directing class at the Yale School of Drama. I was happy to cancel my acceptance of the full scholarship I had been offered to Harvard Divinity School!

**JL:** *What excited you about directing *The Old Settler* at the University of Maryland? Why was this play chosen for the season?*

**WD:** I directed the world premiere of this play at McCarter Theatre at Princeton in association with Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. I then directed the play at my own theatre (Freedom Repertory) in Philadelphia. At each revisiting of the play, I learned more and more of the richness of each of these four lovely

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characters, the deep and affecting relationships, the nature of love and longing, and ultimately, the enduring familial bonds between two sisters. These are themes with which audiences of all ethnicities, of all ages, can relate, identify and appreciate. There is humor, music, conflict, and at each performance the audiences have been moved from laughter, through tears, and, finally, to sheer joy. This is a journey I wanted to share with my students and with audiences here in this part of the world.

**JL:** *The Old Settler by John Henry Redwood is a beautiful, funny and poignant story about loneliness, love and longing. It is also a story of acceptance, forgiveness, the denial of one's past, and challenges that come with being a part of a family and a larger community. How have these ideas influenced your approach to the play?*

**WD:** I believe these elements, in some form or another, are at the heart of all good theatre. The funniest play, if fully realized, at least touches on, allows at least a sneak-peek, even if only for a moment, on the opposite of humor lurking just beneath the surface. And, yes, there is humor to be found in the direst of emotional challenges in a masterful tragic drama. So, I took my usual approach of looking for many, deeper contrasting facets of what, on the surface, may appear to be obvious and complete.

**JL:** *Set in Harlem in the 1940s, what makes the story of The Old Settler relevant for today's audiences? What can audiences learn from Elizabeth and Quilly's relationship? What can we learn from Lou Bessie's spirit of rebirth and a love for the big city? What can we learn from Husband's appreciation for the South — wanting to work the land and a set of old-fashion values?*

**WD:** Love and longing are ageless, timeless. Every living person can connect with these concepts. Ultimately, blood is thicker than water, men come and go, etc., but sisters, for better or for worse, are for life. Each day, we are seeking ways to reinvent ourselves. New attitude, new car, dealing with new challenges to our life-values, etc., but ultimately, the play is about the choices we make, and how we pay for them simply by the lives we choose to lead.

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**JL:** *As you can see, John Henry Redwood created rich, passionate, bold and fully drawn characters. Who do you most relate to in the play and why?*

**WD:** What an interesting question! I think I relate with each character, some by more facets than others, and I think the audience will see a little of themselves in each character, as well. But, I think I identify more with Deacon Slater, a character you briefly hear about, but never see on stage. Like Deacon Slater, one of my goals in life has always been to work behind the scenes to make windfall connections between people that create win-win situations: I'd rather write it, direct it or photograph it on this stage we call life, but not to be on stage or in the photograph, in the spotlight myself. Is that art imitating life or life imitating art?

**JL:** *If there were one thing you want audiences to walk away knowing or think about, what would that be?*

**WD:** I would want them to stop being afraid, to know that love conquers all and to reach out to that estranged family member whose love and laughter they miss and long for so dearly. I would want them to free themselves and become their own, unique version of Deacon Slater!

**JL:** *What's next for you as a director?*

**WD:** Next for me will be a trip to Ghana to visit friends and do photo shoots with the children of the Walter Dallas Children's Foundation in Accra.

# THE OLD SETTLER

By

JOHN HENRY  
REDWOOD

Directed by

WALTER DALLAS



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