

WORLD PREMIERE!

# Line in the Sand

The Norfolk Battle of Massive Resistance



By Chris Hanna

**FEBRUARY 24-MARCH 15, 2009**



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# The Virginia Stage Company



The Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia - Home of Virginia Stage Company

Virginia Stage Company is the region's only fully professional resident theater company, serving an audience of more than 90,000 yearly. Founded in 1968, VSC's mission is to enrich, educate and entertain the region by creating and producing theatrical art of the highest quality and worthy of national prominence. As a non-profit cultural institution, VSC is an artistically driven theater rather than a commercial venture. Contributions from government agencies, corporations, foundations and individuals enable VSC to keep ticket prices affordable for all citizens of the Hampton Roads community while sustaining the highest artistic integrity. Virginia Stage Company's Education Department provides student matinee performances of mainstage productions as well as in-school touring productions to over 40,000 Hampton Roads students annually. VSC also participates as a Partner in Education with several schools by providing services such as performances, drama classes, production training and workshops to Title One schools. Virginia Stage Company also provides a variety of services and programs to our community, including American Sign Language performances and infrared hearing devices for patrons with hearing difficulties.

Virginia Stage Company has achieved a national reputation as one of the country's foremost regional theaters, attracting leading theater artists to the Wells Theatre stage. The Tony Award-winning musical, *The Secret Garden*, began its life at VSC. Our award-winning directors, designers and actors work in other leading theaters across the country as well as on Broadway, off-Broadway and in film and television. VSC also employs professional artisans, technicians and administrators who conceive, design, rehearse and build each production specifically for our audience in Norfolk. These theater professionals come to Hampton Roads from all over the country, and become vital members of our community while working at VSC.

In the years since its founding, Virginia Stage Company has made significant contributions to the quality of life in Hampton Roads: presenting more than 125 plays through more than 2,500 performances; revitalizing and renovating the historic Wells Theatre not only for VSC's use but for the benefit of many other cultural organizations; providing educational programs for students of all ages; and preserving the legacy of live theater for future generations.

*On February 2, 1959 the Norfolk 17 and white students walked into Norfolk Public Schools side by side. Even though they had already faced months of preparation, nothing could prepare them for the ridicule they would face once in the classroom. To these students, their peers and families, this day was filled with mixed emotions—hope, fear, vision. Those 17 students were headed for the first day of many days that would bring them to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.*

## **Historical Background**

When the Confederacy surrendered in 1865, Virginia had to rewrite its constitution to gain admission back into the Union. Although their new constitution appeased the Union, many of the political leaders held the same mindset regarding African Americans they believed prior to the Civil War.

Reconstruction won slaves **emancipation** but not equal rights. During Reconstruction, African Americans enjoyed a short period of political freedoms such as holding office and voting. However, this progress soon ended after the close election of 1877 resulted in a decision that ended Reconstruction to ensure the electoral victory of Republican presidential candidate, Rutherford B. Hays. Republicans abandoned efforts to secure the rights of African Americans and Democrats regained control of their states. Though African Americans were emancipated from the technicalities of slavery, their personal rights were still limited. As Virginia shifted from a predominately rural to a more urban society, life for African Americans shifted as well. Railroads, new industries, and growth of cities provided new jobs for African Americans. Yet, many still worked on former plantations trapped into sharecropping on the land of wealthy landowners. This was very much a hierarchical relationship with the African American sharecropper being treated more like a slave than a tenant and the landowner more like a master than a landlord.

Soon, rights disappeared on the heels of the arrival of **Jim Crow laws** instituted by white segregationists. Many states wrote their new constitutions in such a way as to allow the continued disenfranchisement of African Americans. The Jim Crow laws paved the path for legalized segregation. In 1892, the federal court case of ***Plessy v. Ferguson*** set the precedent for this type of segregation. It ruled that African Americans could be legally separated from whites as long as they were provided with an “equal” alternative. However, their alternative schools and facilities were far from equal. Opposition to segregation continued to grow and activists, both African American and white, fought to change the laws. After World War II, African Americans continued to demand equal treatment and recognition of their rights as American citizens. This time period became known as the modern Civil Rights Movement.

The power of the individual activist was focused in such organizations as the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** of which W.E.B. DuBois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were founding members in 1909. In 1954, these efforts culminated in a U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. The plaintiffs in *Brown* asserted

that this system of racial separation, while masquerading as providing separate but relatively equal treatment of both white and black Americans, instead perpetuated inferior accommodations, services, and treatment for black Americans. Racial segregation in education varied widely from the 17 states that required racial segregation to the 16 that prohibited it. The suit called for the school district to reverse its policy of racial segregation. Separate elementary schools were operated by the Topeka Board of Education under an 1879 Kansas law, which permitted (but did not require) districts to maintain separate elementary school facilities for black and white students in twelve communities with populations over 15,000. The plaintiffs had been recruited by the leadership of the Topeka NAACP. Notable among the Topeka NAACP leaders were the chairman McKinley Burnett; Charles Scott, one of three serving as legal counsel for the chapter; and Lucinda Todd.

The named plaintiff, Oliver L. Brown, was a parent, a welder in the shops of the Santa Fe Railroad, an assistant pastor at his local church, and an African American. He was convinced to join the lawsuit by Scott, a childhood friend. Brown's daughter Linda, a third grader, had to walk six blocks to her school bus stop to ride to Monroe Elementary, her segregated black school one mile away, while Sumner Elementary, a white school, was seven blocks from her house.

As directed by the NAACP leadership, the parents each attempted to enroll their children in the closest neighborhood school in the fall of 1951. They were each refused enrollment and directed to the segregated schools. The District Court ruled in favor of the Board of Education, citing the U.S. Supreme Court precedent set in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had upheld a state law requiring "separate but equal" segregated facilities for blacks and whites in railway cars. The three-judge District Court panel found that segregation in public education has a detrimental effect upon negro children, but denied relief on the ground that the negro and white schools in Topeka were substantially equal with respect to buildings, transportation, curricular, and educational qualifications of teachers.

## **Massive Resistance**

**"Separate but equal"** was declared unconstitutional. All public schools were required to integrate. Not all states wished to comply. Leader of the **Byrd Organization**, U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd continued a legacy of state domination by Conservative Democrats which began after the fall of the Readjuster Party in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the mid 1920s until the late 1960s, the Byrd Organization was a political machine which effectively controlled Virginia politics through a network of courthouse cliques of local constitutional officers in most of the commonwealth's counties.

Senator Byrd waged vocal and bitter opposition to the high court's ruling and subsequent actions to implement public school integration in Virginia. Massive Resistance was a policy declared by U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. on February 24, 1956 to unite other white politicians and leaders in Virginia in a campaign of new state laws and policies to prevent public school desegregation after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954. Although most of

the laws created to implement Massive Resistance were negated by state and federal courts by January 1960, some policies and effects of the campaign against integrated public schools continued in Virginia for many more years.

Later in 1956, the NAACP filed lawsuits around the commonwealth in an attempt to force integration of Virginia schools. By 1958, things had come to a head. Federal courts ordered public schools in several counties to integrate. In response, several schools were ordered to remain closed. On January 19, 1959, the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals declared most of the General Assembly-passed massive resistance laws unconstitutional, ending massive resistance at the state level.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

STATEMENT BY SENATOR HARRY F. BYRD (D-VA.) MAY 17, 1954

The unanimous decision of the Supreme Court to abolish segregation in public education is not only sweeping but will bring implications and dangers of the greatest consequence. It is the most serious blow that has yet been struck against the rights of the states in a matter vitally affecting their authority and welfare.

The Supreme Court reversed its previous decision directing "separate but equal" facilities for the education of both races. Nothing now remains for the Supreme Court to do except to determine the effective date and the method of the application of its decision.

One of the cruel results arising out of this "about-face" of the Supreme Court is that the Southern States, accepting the validity of the previous decision in recent years have expended hundreds of millions of dollars for construction of new Negro school facilities to conform with the policy previously laid down by the Court.

Great progress has been made at tremendous cost throughout the Southern States to carry out that which our Southern State Governments had the right to believe was the law of the land. This reversal by the Supreme Court from its "separate but equal" policy to complete abolition of segregation will create problems such as have never confronted us before.

The decision will be deplored by millions of Americans, and, instead of promoting the education of our children, it is my belief that it will have the opposite effect in many areas of the country. In Virginia we are facing now a crisis of the first magnitude.

Those in authority, and the parents directly affected in the education of their children, should exercise the greatest wisdom in shaping our future course.

Whatever is done should be based on our most matured judgment after sober and exhaustive consideration.

**Read the letter from Senator Byrd. Make a list of his arguments for maintaining a segregated public school system.**

This image can also be viewed at: <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/HIST604/images/1954byrd.jpg>

**Imagine you are a student in Norfolk in 1954. Write a letter to the School Board or to Senator Byrd expressing your opinions as a student.**

*Do you agree with his arguments to keep the schools segregated?*

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*Do you feel compelled to urge the School Board to integrate the schools?*

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*What are your fears and hopes surrounding the integration of schools?*

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**Spend a day as a segregated classroom. Split the class in half down the middle of the room and explore what it would have been like to have to use different tables, doorways, restrooms.**

*How does all of this make you feel?*

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*What do you think would have been the most difficult part of living in a segregated society?*

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*Do you feel our society is still segregated in some sense?*

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*If your answer is yes, in what ways?*

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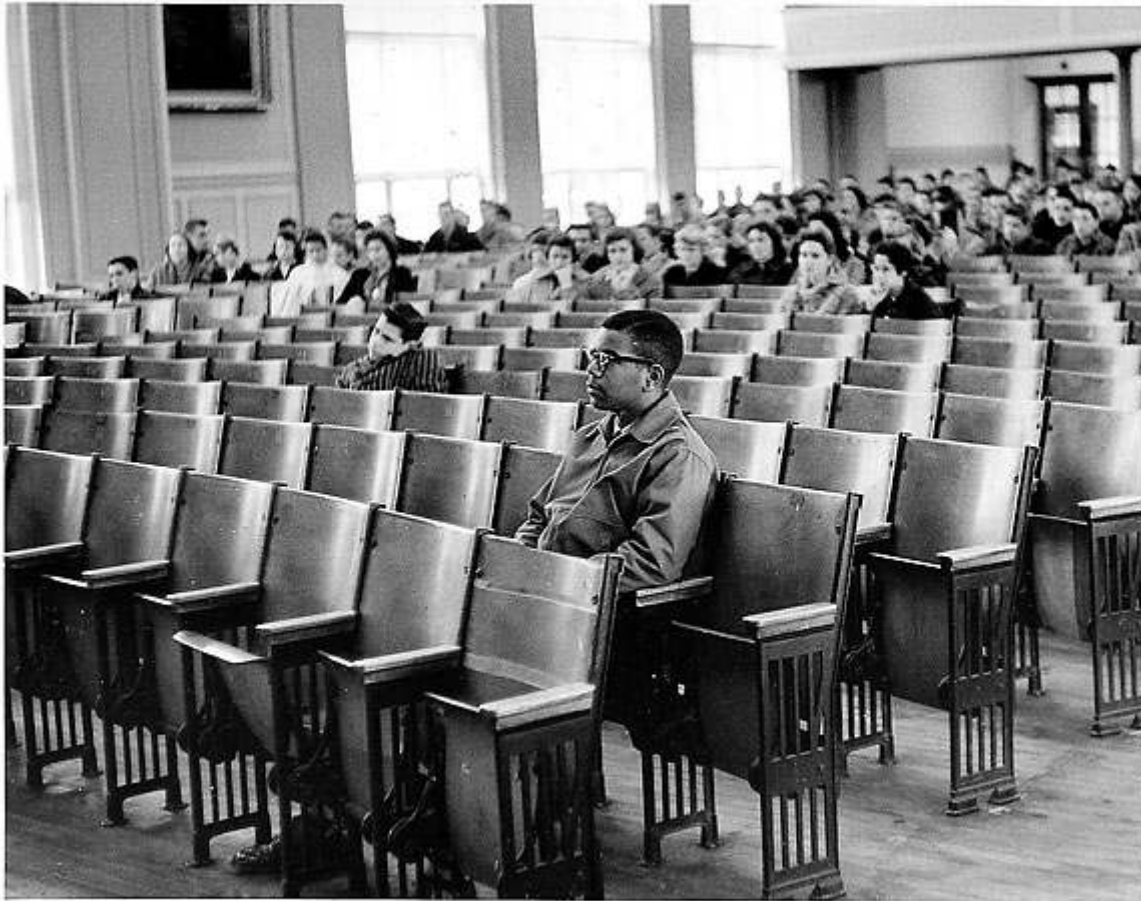


Photo used by permission from the *Virginian-Pilot*.

**Take a look at the photo of the young man seated in an auditorium. This photo is of a student named Louis Cousins. He is sitting in the auditorium of Norfolk's Maury High School.**

*Why do you think he is sitting by himself?*

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*How do you think the students in this auditorium felt? Both Louis and his classmates?*

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*What might keep someone separated from the group in today's schools? Does the neighborhood someone is from make them more or less popular? Their clothes? The music they listen to?*

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*Why does this happen? What can you do to keep discrimination out of your school?*

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Issue Date: Tuesday, January 13, 2009, Posted On: 1/12/2009

<http://www.portfolioweekly.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=&nm=&type=Publishing&mod=Publications%3A%3AArticle&mid=8F3A7027421841978F18BE895F87F791&tier=4&id=E234007CAD39462D8099F5AA85CC0ED3>

## *A Line in the Sand*

# Playwright glad he faced Massive Resistance

by Wil LaVeist

It began as a simple play about a complex time 50 years ago. After two years of research and writing, Chris Hanna sought feedback in May 2008 on a first draft of his Massive Resistance play, *Line In the Sand*, before a community group, including members of the Norfolk 17, who desegregated the city's public schools. Hanna found himself in a town meeting scene like one from a civil rights movement documentary. The Virginia Stage Company's artistic director was looking forward to the feedback, but didn't expect a backlash. Nonetheless, he took notes, reflected and sat down to evolve a play that could help change the way the community talks about race relations. *Line in the Sand* will run Feb. 24-March 15 as part of Norfolk's 50th anniversary commemorating the end of Massive Resistance. On Jan. 14 at Chrysler Hall, Hanna will discuss the play's evolution at an event sponsored by the Virginia Historical Society. *Port Folio Weekly* talked with Hanna about the play.



### **What was your initial reaction to the harsh feedback?**

Whenever you're working on a play, there's always so many different voices involved. It was great to see how passionate everyone was. The tricky thing about the play was that it's about history, but it's not intended to be historical because it's difficult to actually get people to agree on what actually happened. I set out to tell about the closing and opening of the schools, which is what the commemoration is about. I stopped the story at the point that the schools reopened.

### **Which is where the Norfolk 17 story begins and why they resisted?**

Right. That's part two of the play or another play altogether. But I had to figure out that since we're only doing one play, how to tell their story. In this town it's very difficult to tell a story about what happened to the 17 without telling about what happened with the lost class of '59 and vice versa. The reason I'm doing this play is for the community, for us to talk about it. That's what plays are supposed to do.

**CREATING A DIALOGUE:**  
VSC's Chris Hanna talks about the latest revision of his play.

### **Seems like an unexpected battle between a documentary and a play?**

A documentary person will try to figure out from research what's the most accurate honest truth. A playwright takes what he thinks is most interesting about the story and develops that to deliver a message. I've taken different characters and made them larger—like Vivian Carter [Mason] of the NAACP—than they actually were. I've created totally fictitious characters, like for the Norfolk 17, and compiled them.

Some of the criticism was, 'You've given everything to Vivian and there were other people involved,' but I said, 'Yes, because I needed a heroine.'

The biggest character that I had to deal with was Mayor [W. Fred] Duckworth. First people said I was completely too sympathetic toward him. In the second version, they said I made him too much of a bad guy. But this is all the natural and wonderful process of developing a play. Mark Anthony's greatest speech from *Julius Caesar* [is] 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...' Julius Caesar never said those words, and Shakespeare wasn't alive in Caesar's time to hear them. But that's what plays are about.

**Yeah, but Shakespeare wrote several decades after Caesar's time. It's tricky doing a historic play when those who lived it are still alive.**

Definitely. Fifty years in this town is not a very long time. I didn't realize that. I also didn't realize that many people had never had their story told, and they were looking to me to tell their story. Hopefully there are many celebrations going on. WHRO is making a documentary about the story of the Norfolk 17, so hopefully people will also be ready to hear a fantasized version of what happened. My sense is that a large part of the white community doesn't want to talk about what happened 50 years ago because much of it is too embarrassing. There are large amounts of the black community that haven't wanted to talk about it because it's too painful. We have to be able to talk about it as a community.

**How did you begin the creative process of incorporating the feedback without feeling slighted personally?**

I'm a 50-year-old white male who moved down here (from New York) several years ago. I had to look at myself and see how much people perceive that might actually be coming from my own prejudices. From there that let me get in touch with the honesty of what people were going through. I wrote an opening scene about black parents preparing to send their child to desegregate the school. The play's director, Timothy Douglas, who is African American, said to me, 'It's a great scene, but it's too white. That's not how African American parents would talk to their children' (laughing). It was a great moment for the play and typical of the collaboration that goes into making a play work. People have begun to understand that in my heart I want to tell the stories as accurately as I can. If you put a painting on the wall people will argue about it and they should. It's the same with a play.

**What are some interesting nuggets people will learn?**

I think interesting truths will come out. For example, there were a number of people in the black community who felt the schools should not have been integrated for a variety of reasons. Black institutions were very important. That colored kids got their pride from being around colored people. You throw them into a white society and they lose that. It's similar to why you have women colleges for the esteem of women. Great leaders in the black schools, principals and teachers, would be shuttled to the bottom in the white institutions. Meanwhile, a lot of the whites were saying that they weren't being racist, but rather they worried integration would drive whites into private schools and suburban areas, destroying the city's public school system for whites of lesser means. It's a complex story with a lot of gray areas. It's not just black and white.

**Activity Sheet**  
**Reflection on the Performance**

Let's use all our senses to reflect on Virginia Stage Company's  
production of *Line in the Sand*

**Visually:** *Costumes, the physicality of the actors.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Aurally:** *sound effects, vocal quality, diction, acoustics.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Texture:** *fabric of costumes, sound, performances.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Discussion:** How do these reflections help to reveal the following element of the play:  
the theme; the plot line; the main action; the time period?

## Writing Activity

# Be a Theater Critic

A very strong element in the success or failure of a new production is the Theater Critic. Use the following outline to write a review of the Virginia Stage Company's production of *Line in the Sand*.

### Paragraph 1: ABOUT THE PLAY

1. What was the title or the play?
2. Who wrote the play?
3. Which theater company produced it?
4. What was your overall reaction to the play?
5. Give a brief synopsis of the plot of the play.

### Paragraph 2:

1. What aspects of the production were similar to how you envisioned them? What aspects were different? What aspects would you like to have changed and why?
2. What scenes in the play did you find most/least interesting, entertaining, and enjoyable? What about these scenes made you like or dislike them so much?
3. Did the production move too slowly, quickly, or at the right speed?

### Paragraph 3: ABOUT THE CHARACTERS/ PERFORMERS

1. Did any characters touch you personally? Who was your favorite?
2. Were the character's motivations clear? In other words, could you understand what each character wanted?
3. Which actor do you think gave the best performance? What did this actor do that made you think s/he gave the best performance?
4. How did the way the actors use their bodies onstage enhance their performances?

### Paragraph 4: ABOUT THE SOUND

1. Did the music/sound add to the mood and atmosphere of the production or take away from it? How?

### Paragraph 5: ABOUT THE COSTUMES

1. Were the costumes appropriate for the mood and style of the production? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Did any of the costumes reflect a character's personality or wealth? What clues did the costumes give about the characters?

### Paragraph 6: CONCLUSION

1. Would you recommend this production to someone? If so, to whom? If not, why not?