

PEOPLE

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Giving 'em hell at ECC



President's grandson tells of growing up Truman

Story and photos by Dan Claxton, *Missourian* Features Editor

People on the campus of East Central College Friday night can be forgiven if they thought they saw a ghost, because when the lights went up in the Anglin Performing Arts Center at 7:00, there sat Harry S Truman, big as life.

Of course, it wasn't the real Harry S Truman, but the man sitting at the president's desk on the Oval Office set on stage was as close as you can get to the real thing. It was Truman's own grandson, Clifton Truman Daniel, portraying his immortal grandfather in the one-man play "Give 'Em Hell, Harry!," part of the month-long observance of the third annual Community Read, sponsored by Scenic Regional Library, the Washington Public Library and ECC. Community Read is an exercise in community bonding which attempts to have as many people as possible read the same book at the same time. This year's book is "Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure: The True Story of a Great American Road Trip" by Matthew Algeo. In fitting with the theme, Daniel was invited to perform the play. Daniel is the oldest grandchild of Harry and Bess Truman and the son of Margaret Truman and Clifton Daniel, Jr., former managing editor of the New York Times.

The play

"Give 'Em Hell, Harry!" was written by Samuel Gallu in 1975, following Truman's death in late 1972. It premiered at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., with James Whitmore playing Truman. The movie version soon followed, also starring Whitmore, who was nominated for a best actor Oscar in the role.

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1972, so he saw him in the later years of his life, but the play is set when Truman was 62, a slightly different Truman than Daniel knew. "I watched a lot of the archival films at the Truman Library. I watched and listened to him to get his accent and some of his mannerisms. Most of my time was spent learning the 85-page script, trying to keep it in my head, because there's nobody else on stage except me. No cues, no nothing." Everything in Daniel's portrayal of Truman seems perfect. It is easy to allow yourself to believe you are watching the real president, not an actor. And, of course, part of that is genetics. Daniel has a clear physical resemblance to the 33rd president. "I do look like him, I favor him as they might say, but it takes a lot of hair color and some make-up, so there's a process involved, but you know, from 30 feet away, I get away with it," he said. The real challenge was the voice. Daniel's natural voice sounds somewhat like Truman's, but he said he had to work to make it stage-ready. "The toughest part was trying to get his voice and his accent, because you have a lot of those early films, you know, the quality wasn't great, so his voice sounds like he's speaking through a tin cup. You know, his voice was way high and way more nasal than it actually was. So I had to dig through the Truman Library archives. And then, of course, I'd find more recent ones where his voice had changed. So getting the 62-year-old Harry Truman's voice was tough," said Daniel.

Whatever Daniel did, it was effective; he had the Friday night audience at ECC eating out of his hand. When the Truman character was being serious, you could hear a pin drop; when he was joking, the audience gladly chuckled along. Some in the audience, which was com-



As part of the one-man play, Daniel interacted with various characters that were there only in imagination. Here, Daniel presents Truman's side of the conversation as he discusses foreign affairs with a cabinet secretary.

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Daniel didn't take up the role until 2017. "I was a trained stage actor, and I knew this play existed, but it never occurred to me to play my late grandfather until people started to tell me, as I got into my late 50s and early 60s, that I began to look like him," he said.

Although he hadn't thought about acting in the play, he had seen the movie, long ago. "I've seen the film version, weirdly, on a flight to Athens with my mother. You fly with Margaret Truman, you get to go first class, so the flight attendant came and said 'Hey they're showing 'Give 'Em Hell, Harry,' back in economy, if you want to see it, Mrs. Truman.' And she said 'Oh, God no! I've seen it.' And I said, 'Well I haven't.' So he went back, found an open seat, and watched the movie. "I enjoyed it," said Daniel.

But that was the last time he saw anyone else perform in the role. "I wouldn't watch James Whitmore again. I've never seen that show again, because I don't want to do James Whitmore doing Harry Truman," he said.

Daniel was 15 when Truman died in

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Some in the audience, which was comprised of mostly older people, may remember Truman visiting Washington several times. Legend has it that Truman would arrive on the train and walk up the hill to the Old Dutch Tavern for a drink with the proprietor who also served in WWI.

Typical grandpa

Daniel had a personal relationship with Truman. It was a familial relationship, and as Daniel was young, didn't often involve discussions of serious things like being president of the United States. "People sometimes ask, 'Wow, Harry Truman, what pearls of wisdom did he give you?'" Daniel recalled. "And I always say 'Quit running in here with that, get off the furniture, no you can't climb on the roof.' You know, typical grandpa."

Daniel remembers his grandfather as someone who was very conscious of his role in history. Because of this, he says it's difficult to find anecdotes that people haven't already heard. "You know, he was always very forthright about who he was and what he was thinking. He was always very open about his life. He saved every scrap of paper, every letter,



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Harry Truman waving to the camera on a trip to New York in 1953.