

Actor brings Wesley's words to life

By Woody Woodrick
Advocate Editor

John Wesley's statement that the world was his parish has been a way of life for B.J. Johnston.

The actor has spent most of his life working as a missionary using theater and music to spread the gospel, just as Wesley did. Now, Johnston is doing it as John Wesley.

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A resident of Jackson, Johnston recently retired from the faculty at Belhaven College to begin sharing the life of Wesley with others.

"I'm really getting back to my love of teaching through the arts," Johnston said. "It's teaching Christian history. So often we don't tend to know Christian history. This does it in a way personified."

Johnston spends about two hours transforming himself into Wesley, considered the founder of Methodism. The play, written by Brad Smith, takes about two hours in its full form. However, Johnston adapts the presentation to fit the time period allotted.

Johnston believes the play shares a story of faith.

"This is a play about transformation," he said. "We see Wesley transformed from a

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man who would earn his salvation to giving up and realizing he can't earn his salvation."

Johnston, who has moved 35 times in the past 30 years including mission postings outside the U.S., says the play is unique because it doesn't interpret Wesley's words and deeds. All of the dialogue is taken directly from Wesley's journals.

Johnston believes theater ministry and other more visual media play important roles in worship.

"Christ told stories and parables," he said.

He pointed out that several generations have grown up with Sesame Street, MTV and a video world. "They are a sight-and-sound generation," he said. "People come to expect to be entertained, and we are learning to present things in creative ways."

Johnston, who has appeared at seven churches in the Mississippi Conference, acknowledges that using various media in worship takes discernment, but adds, "(God) can lead us into wonderfully creative ways of sharing the gospel."

"What a difference there is between someone talking about Wesley and seeing someone acting it out," Johnston said. "It engages a person's imagination."

The Rev. Rob Hill, pastor at Jackson Broadmeadow United Methodist Church, said the play inspired his congregation.

"In the morning worship service, I told



Actor B.J. Johnston needs about two hours to change his appearance to become John Wesley for the play *The Man from Aldersgate*.



my congregation that John Wesley would be visiting us that night, and B.J. Johnston made us feel as if he really had," Hill said. "The play and Johnston's performance were inspirational, reminding us of John Wesley's sincere call for holiness of heart and life. In a way, it felt less like I was attending a performance and more like we had been in a worship service."

The Rev. David Cox said members of Meadville UMC had a similar experience. "As he shared, the evening quickly moved from a performance to a worship service as he quoted from Wesley's journal and shared scripture," Cox said. "The content was very informative, but most of all, I really received a glimpse of the heart of Wesley. At times B.J. was humorous and interacted with the audience. He kept everyone's attention for the entire performance that actually ended with a call to commitment."

Johnston said that atmosphere is what he hopes to achieve. "Our prayer is that God will use the things he has equipped us to do to fan the flames of revival," he said.

Johnston has presented the play in seven other Mississippi Conference churches, including Hazlehurst, Meadville, Edwards, Vaiden, Yazoo City, Kosciusko First and Meridian Pleasant Hills.

ITINERARY

Upcoming performances of
"The Man from Aldersgate" at Mississippi
United Methodist churches:

- May 11 – Ellisville UMC
- May 14 – Jackson Christ UMC
- May 27 – Jackson Aldersgate UMC

To inquire about scheduling a performance call 601-951-1761 or E-mail bj@kareproductions.com or write B.J. Johnston, 1473 Tracewood Drive, Jackson, MS 39211.