

# Local Life

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## Aston man brings America's past to life as wonderful and wacky 'Mr. History'

By BETTE ALBURGER

Times Correspondent

ASTON — Meet "Mr. History," a wacky and wondrously creative character who makes America's past come alive for kids through enthralling and exciting historical musicals.

Created by award-winning playwright, author and composer Granville Burgess of Aston, "Mr. History" and a cast of professional actors are convincing school children in grades 3 through 6 that seeing history unfold in front of the footlights is a lot better than reading about it in a textbook. Or as Burgess puts it, "An actor on a stage is more fun than a picture on a page."

Along with a mission to make it fun instead of boring to learn about events of long ago, Burgess is on a mission to find a permanent home in Delaware County for "Mr. History." He's also seeking corporate and community support, so that the lively original musical productions presented by Time Travelin' Entertainment (TTE), a division of EdVenture Networks, Inc., can continue to entertain, educate and inspire young people, their parents and their teachers.

TTE also plans to involve youngsters in history through a weekly television series, an interactive Web site and an Internet game.

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Based on all the positive feedback the production company has received to date, there's a definite need for this unique kind of entertainment that's both imaginative and informative. Many of the young letter writers who've traveled back in time with "Mr. History" tell Burgess they never knew learning about the past could be so enjoyable.

"One of my passions is turning kids on to history," said Burgess, who graduated magna cum laude in the subject from Princeton University and has a Masters of Fine Arts degree in directing from Catholic University in Washington, DC. Among his career credits is director of Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater for seven years.

For more than 25 years, Burgess has been dedicated to making America's heritage accessible to wide audiences through accurate and engaging dramas based on historical



GRANVILLE BURGESS

As Mr. History

facts. His commitment to history musicals began in the mid-1970s, when he composed "Paul Revere Rides Again" and "Common Sense."

Both were underwritten by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Both premiered on the Mall in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1976 in conjunction with the U.S. bicentennial celebration.

In 1996, after years of theatrical and TV experience in Philadelphia and New York, Burgess began working with Stephen Lawrence of New York City, a successful songwriter, composer and arranger who's written more than 150 songs for TV's "Sesame Street." Combining his love of history and children with his belief that learning about the past should be pleasurable, Burgess and his not-for-profit GB Productions, Inc. collaborated with Lawrence to create a whimsical guide to the past in the person of the magical "Mr. History."

Like his character, the comical time traveler's costume represents many different eras, with pieces of clothing from various time periods stitched together to form one outrageous outfit.

The collaboration also resulted in "Glory Road!," a musical drama about the Underground Railroad. In this lively production, "Mr. History" and five kids ages 10 to 14 play multiple roles in depicting the story of a runaway slave and his son who are led north to freedom by Harriet Tubman.

"Glory Road!" was followed by "Dream ...," the story in song about Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott. The story begins with young King studying theology at Crozer Theological

Seminary in Chester, which makes it relevant to Delaware County audiences.

The musical, in which five children also play historical characters, shows how King's beliefs were put to the test when he met Rosa Parks and led the bus boycott. It dramatizes how a person can carry into the "real world" what's learned in the classroom.

Burgess wrote the book and lyrics for both musicals and Lawrence composed the music.

"I chose Harriet Tubman and Dr. King as the subjects of our first productions because I believe there's a need for greater understanding between the races," said Burgess, who noted he always seeks input from daughters Loring, 12, and Clara, 11.

"Glory Road!" had its world premiere at Neumann College in 2001, playing for two weeks in February during Black History Month. It was seen by 3,000 local students and their parents and teachers, and was supported by the Delaware County Historical Society.

This year during Black History Month, a combined audience of more than 5,000 saw "Glory Road!" at Neumann College and "Dream..." at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

In early 2001, digital media expert/entrepreneur Larry Silverman of Upper Darby joined Burgess and Lawrence to launch EdVenture Networks, Inc. Its goal is to bring Burgess' historical dramas to larger audiences and additional media. Scripts and music have been created for a proposed children's TV series called "Time Travelin'" with Mr. History. In the works are a Web site and interactive computer games to excite youth about history and engage them in the learning process.

Based on the success of "Glory Road!" and "Dream...", EdVenture Networks, Inc. was asked by the University of Pennsylvania this past March to create a new historical musical about classical Rome. Fanciful and informative, "When in Rome" will celebrate the opening in October of the refurbished Classical Gallery at the university museum.

"We have a great vision and great plans for using our country's values to entertain and educate about American history and what a great nation we are," said Burgess. "Now we're waiting for someone to say 'Hey, I want to put my name on this important venture.'"

■ For information about sponsorship or to book a performance, contact Diane Johnson, director of marketing for EdVenture Networks, Inc. at 610-494-4035.