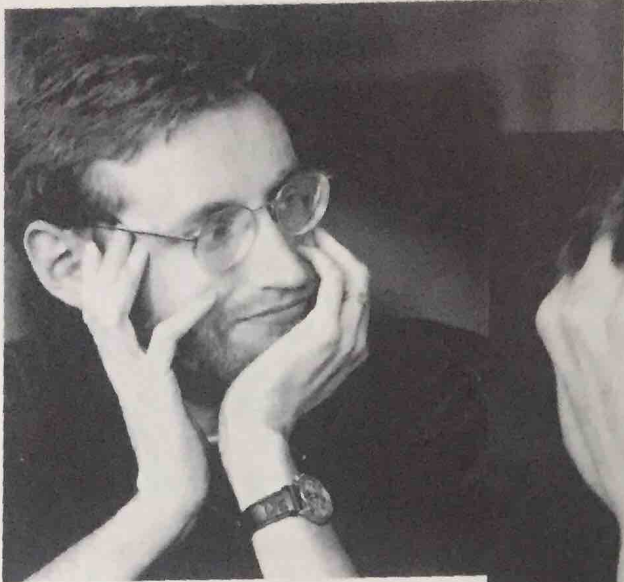


Seeking Truth



Eric Coble's new play seeks to peer inside the mind of abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth

BY CHRISTINE MCBURNEY

It was Gail Peguesse who led Eric Coble to *Truth*.

A Cleveland native now working in New York, Peguesse needed a thesis role to earn her master's degree from The Actor's Studio, so she turned to Coble, her friend and former acting teacher, and told him: "Write me something."

The result is a one-woman show based on the life of Sojourner Truth, the 19th-century crusader for civil rights. The play gets its world premiere at Dobama Theater on January 15 before moving to New York for a February run, where it will be performed by Peguesse and directed by Sam Schact, an Actor's Studio teacher and director.

The staging of *Truth* here and in New York is another milestone in the career of Coble, who at the relatively



The write stuff: Though he originally studied to be an actor, Eric Coble has found himself earning a living as a full-time wordsmith.

tender age of 30 has already made a name for himself locally and nationally as a playwright. With *Truth*, we get to witness another unusual turn in a road that has led Coble from Edinburgh, Scotland, through a childhood on Navajo and Ute reservations in New Mexico and Colorado and, eventually, to Cleveland Heights, where he lives in what he calls a "handyman's delight" with his wife and two children. Coble, a decidedly white man of the 20th century, has turned his attention this time to the tale

of an African-American woman of the mid-19th century.

The reason he decided to focus on her, Coble says, is simple: It's a great story, and one that needs to be told. "This woman lived for over 80 years and has virtually slipped through the cracks of history," says Coble. "We learn in school about [Harriet] Tubman and [Frederick] Douglass and the Underground Railroad, but that's it." (*Truth* kicks off a series of outreach events surrounding Great Lakes Theater

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Festival's March production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Dobama and GLTF are hoping for a "cross-fertilization" of audiences.)

A history lesson in the form of an extended monologue, the play follows Truth from the little girl named Isabelle who is sold as a slave to the free woman who fights for the rights of all women. It is a feat for any actor, because *Truth* begins when the title character is 70 and looking back on her life. We witness her interaction with characters from all stages of her fascinating past: masters, husbands, children, preachers, President Lincoln and even the angry mobs at her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech in Akron. But *Truth* is more than educational theater. As in any great story, the play transcends its subject matter – in this case history and politics – and takes us on a quest. The play, Coble says, is emblematic of the spiritual journey that we all go on; how we navigate the world to find our place and how Truth found her path.

It's entirely appropriate for Coble, whose peripatetic life would make an interesting play in its own right. Coble doesn't see it that way, though, instead describing his childhood as the makings of "great party talk now, but it did not feel exotic growing up being an outsider, the only white child." Life on the reservations influenced him, he says, with "world views that are endemic to Native American life."

Coble's presence in Cleveland stems from his decision to pursue a master's degree in acting at Ohio University, which led to an acting internship at the Cleveland Play House. He also spent time on stage for GLTF.

It was at Ohio University that Coble wrote his first play, a one-act whose positive reception led him to write another, which was then taken

to New York's Playwrights Horizon by OU classmate Victoria Pero (who is directing Caryl Churchill's current Broadway play, *The After Dinner Joke*). Staying in touch with Pero and other former classmates led to more connections and, eventually, to the realization that he could make more money writing than acting. Writing also afforded Coble the opportunity to take care of his two kids while his wife, Carol Laursen, worked full time at University Hospitals. "My first plays," he jokes, "were written while I was in the playpen and [their son] Trevor was running around the outside of it."

Coble's first Cleveland production

"It's invaluable to have a group of peers bouncing ideas around."

came when his play *Isolated Incidents* was produced by Cleveland Public Theatre's New Plays Festival in 1994. He has since transformed *Isolated Incidents* into a screenplay that has been optioned by a Hollywood studio. Two other screenplays are in pre-production.

His writing output is prolific – eight to 10 scripts a year – and varied. He's written five children's plays, mostly adaptations. He is a staff writer for WCLV's *Footlights on Parade* and an occasional commentator on National Public Radio. He's even co-written a horror-comedy series that MTV is interested in. But Coble's first love remains the writing of plays, for which he's won both local and national recognition.

While some would see New York

or Hollywood as more appropriate home bases, Coble says he has found a home in Cleveland. "I travel to Los Angeles and New York, but this is where I want to raise my children," he says. For one thing, it's affordable, meaning that he can pay his share of the mortgage just by writing.

"It's a balancing act, though. One month nothing is coming in the door, then next month several royalty checks come in and I go grocery shopping."

But another reason to stay is the Playwrights' Unit at the Play House. "It's invaluable to have a group of peers bouncing ideas around with each other," Coble says. "Sometimes the comments can be harsh and hard to hear and not everyone is right about your play, but I've learned to keep my work my own while taking advice and critiques."

Coble sees the Playwrights' Unit as evidence of a new collaborative spirit that seems to be blossoming in local theatrical circles. *Truth*, for example, sets in motion a collaboration of Great Lakes, Dobama and the Play House. The play was born at the Play House and will be directed at Dobama by Kenn McLaughlin of Great Lakes. This could be the wave of the future, says Coble, who notes that the new artistic directors at Great Lakes and the Play House – James Bundy and Peter Hackett, respectively – have made plain a desire to work together to support local theater artists.

And Coble is prepared to play his part, too, by getting up each morning and plugging away at any of the five or six projects he's got going at any given time. There's nothing mysterious about it, he insists: "It's like plumbing, you get in and do the job." ♦

Like Eric Coble, Christine McBurney is an actor who makes more money writing – in her case for In Theater magazine.