

Serling's censored Till script to get reading

Special to Sentinel-Voice

More than a half-century after it was twice censored by network television, Rod Serling's story on the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and his message about prejudice will finally be told the way Serling wanted.

The original stage script of Serling's "Noon on Doomsday" will be read Saturday at Ithaca College during a conference on Serling's life and legacy. The award-winning writer-creator of "The Twilight Zone" taught at Ithaca from 1967 until 1975, when he died.

"Serling seemed to struggle with network and sponsor censorship all his career, but I believe his trying to tell the story of the Emmett Till case was the pinnacle of this battle," said Andrew Polak, the board president of the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation, a Binghamton-based nonprofit group that works to further Serling's legacy. "This will be the first time the story will be told as Rod intended."

Historians view Till's case as one of the catalysts of the Civil Rights Movement. Till was a Black 14-year-old from Chicago who whistled at a White woman while visiting relatives in Mississippi. The two men accused of kidnapping and brutally murdering Till were acquitted, though they later admitted to the crime.

Serling tried twice to dra-



EMMETT TILL

matize Till's murder and the acquittal of his killers. In both cases, the writer met with sponsor censorship and network interference that diluted his final work, said researchers Tony Albarella and Amy E. Boyle Johnston.

"Serling was one of the first people to write about current events. He was taking a major front-page issue and showing the universal appeal of it and showing our own implications. Today, that's a dime a dozen. But when Serling was doing it, that was shocking," said Johnston, who's working on a biography of Serling to be published in 2009.

By the time Till was lynched, Serling was one of the most celebrated writers of TV's Golden Age and already had written several socially conscious scripts, including "Patterns" (about corporate corruption) and "Requiem for a Heavy-

weight." Serling's Till story was initially accepted and approved by the producers of ABC's "The United States Steel Hour," for which he'd already written several well-received scripts.

But when it was reported that Serling was writing about the Till case, thousands of protests poured in, mostly from members of the White Citizens Council, a Southern White supremacist organization, said Johnston.

Serling produced three "Doomsday" scripts. The first two were for the stage, said Johnston. In the original,

the victim was a college-aged Black man. Serling's language and descriptions also were more coarse and idiomatic in the original version, she said.

When it ran on television in April 1956, "Noon on Doomsday" was so watered down as to be meaningless, Johnston said.

The location was changed to New England. The murdered Jew was transformed into an unnamed foreigner. The word "lynch" was excised from the script, as was anything deemed "too Southern" in connotation. The vil-

lain was softened to "just a good decent, American boy momentarily gone wrong," Johnston said.

Two years later, Serling tried again to examine the extreme consequences of prejudice enmeshed in Till's saga. His new effort was titled "A Town Has Turned to Dust," and he offered it to CBS for "Playhouse 90."

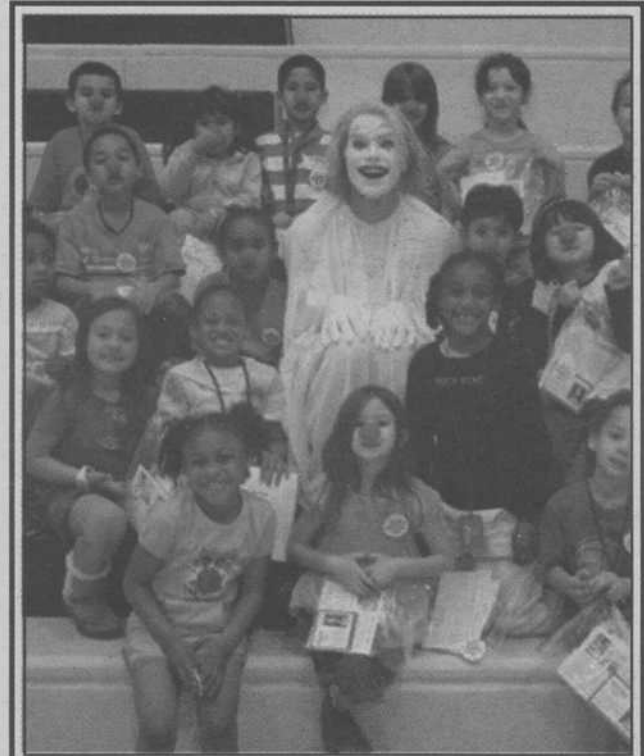
But CBS executives again eviscerated the script — changing the central character to a Mexican boy who falls in love from afar with a White shopkeeper's wife, said Albarella, who's work-

ing on the sixth book of a 10-book series about "The Twilight Zone" called "As Timeless as Infinity."

Although it received critical acclaim, a dismayed Serling later said, "By the time 'A Town Has Turned to Dust' went before the cameras, my script had turned to dust."

But those experiences, said Polak, help lead Serling to another place — where he was free to explore the darkened human heart by use of allegory and within the context of fantasy: "The Twilight Zone."

“What I really need is”
a _____.



Sentinel-Voice photo by Marty Frierson

CLOWNIN' AROUND

Through a collaboration between Cirque du Soleil and Project Shero, a local non-profit group, one of the performers of "O" shares some time and magic with students of the WonderChild—Dream Explorer program. The event took place at the Lied Memorial Boys and Girls Club on Friday.

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