

Play about Sam Ervin to open in Morganton

By SHARON McBRAYER
The News Herald

MORGANTON — "With the fingers of one arthritic hand, he holds a bottle of bourbon whisky and a bottle of ginger ale by their necks. With the other he carries a couple of glasses with ice cubes and he has a walking cane hooked over one forearm."

"He is a good-natured, often flustered southern gentlemen who enjoys laughing uproariously at his own stories — or as he calls them, 'stow-ries'."

That description introduces the audience to one of Morganton's native sons in a new world

premiere play being produced at the City of Morganton Municipal Auditorium.

It is a one-man play that takes place on the back porch of Sam J. Ervin Jr.'s home during a summer evening in August 1974 on the night Richard Nixon resigned the presidency. Ervin is taking a break from the media that is camped out in front of his house and sneaks one reporter from The News Herald (the audience) into his house for an exclusive.

The idea of having Ervin give a reporter an exclusive actually came from the fact that

See ERVIN / Page 5A

From Page One

Ervin

Continued from Page One

Ervin did give a former News Herald reporter an exclusive on the night that John Erlichman and H.R. 'Bob' Haldeman were sent to prison.

The play, however, is not about Watergate. It is a play about Ervin's life, which Watergate was a part of.

It is not only a play about a Morganton native, it was written by a former Morganton resident and Ervin will be acted by a Morganton native.

The play takes the audience through Ervin's life; from his boyhood to college, the military, his marriage to "Miss Margaret" and his family and to Harvard for law school. During the play Ervin also talks about his election at age 25 to the N.C. legislature, his election to the U.S. Senate (where he was sworn in by a youthful Vice President Nixon), to his central role in the Watergate investigation.

Ervin, in the play, talks about religion, segregation and integration, human liberties and the South.

The playwright Steve Bouser, editor of The Pilot in Southern Pines, said the idea for the play came when he was writing a play about somebody else and got so bogged down that he decided to set it aside.

He said he wanted to write a piece that would resonate with people and it hit him one day to write about Ervin.

Bouser said it came to him about three years ago when the country was going through the Clinton impeachment.

He said the play is certainly not an authorized or sanitized version of actual events, but the events of his life and many of the stories he tells are factual.

Bouser was the associate editor of The News Herald during the height of Watergate and Ervin was one of three trustees of the paper.

Bouser said he and the editor would have dinner occasionally with Ervin and many of the stories that Ervin would tell during those dinners are used in the play. He admitted, however, a certain amount are made up.

Talking about the play being produced and premiered here in Morganton, Bouser said, "I'm excited that this is happening. I thought, 'man, this material is unbelievable. Why hasn't anybody else done it?'"

He says the play is not just a series of reminiscences about the tragedies and triumphs of Ervin's life, but interwoven throughout are musings of a complex man pondering the nature of good and evil.

He describes Ervin as a learned man who loves to

express himself in the cadences of Shakespeare and the King James Bible and said he was a man as much at home with the mighty as with the lowly.

Bouser said throughout the play Ervin tells delightful jokes gleaned from the streets of Morganton and "stow-ries" of colorful backwoods courtroom scenes to help put thing in perspective.

According to CoMMA Director Bill Wilson, Bouser approached him in January of this year to see if there was a possibility it could be done in Morganton.

"He just feels Morganton was the best place to open it," Wilson said.

This is the first world premier CoMMA has ever been involved in and the first play CoMMA has ever been involved with from the beginning. And Wilson, as well as everyone involved, wants to make sure it is done right.

"One thing we're looking for is to be true to the character and spirit of Sam Ervin. We want to make sure the portrayal is accurate and fair," Wilson said.

The actor who will be portraying Ervin is Morganton's own Joe Inscow, the son of Inky and Harriet Inscow. He lives in Richmond, Va., and as a professional actor has appeared in

numerous plays, television series, features and film.

Some of his recent film credits include "Nell," "First Kid," "Lassie" and "Toy Soldier," as well as national theater tours of "Oliver!", "Singin' in the Rain" and "Brigadoon." He has also appeared in television episodes of "I'll Fly Away," "Matlock," "In the Heat of the Night" and "Walker, Texas Ranger."

Wilson said, "We're excited about having Joe Inscow. There's no doubt he could do this role."

Inscow, however, did have a few doubts in the beginning.

"I had reservations at first because I bear little resemblance to him," Inscow said.

However, he plans to resemble Ervin as closely as possible with makeup, speech and how he carries himself.

"There are so many facets of the man to deal with. His accent, his eyebrows, the way he moves and facial expressions. If you were to lose any of those things, you would lose who he was," Inscow said.

"So far, I think I'm meeting the challenge and hope I do him justice."

He said the script was the deciding factor in him taking the role. He said it (the script) made it hard to walk away. Inscow calls it an amazing piece of work.

He was in Los Angeles when he got the script and he showed it to two of his friends who are directors. Both agreed it was an amazing script and told him he would be crazy to walk away from it.

Deciding to take the role is also a bit personal for Inscow.

Inscow said he has vivid memories of when he was a child and he and the senator attended the same church — Morganton First Presbyterian Church. There is one incident in particular that he remembers.

"I remember standing just inside the doorway and seeing this big man with a cane who came up to me and pulled a coin out of my ear," he said. "It said so much about the gentle nature of the man and his kindness."

Dr. Jean C. Ervin, 92, sister of Sam Ervin, was a part of the first meeting for the play and she thinks Inscow is the right man for the job.

"I think it's an excellent idea," she said, "and Joe Inscow is a wonderful actor. I saw him as Mark Twain about eight years ago. He came to Grace Ridge and presented 'An evening with Mark Twain.'"

Even though she has not yet read the script, she said she looks forward to reading it.

Wilson said he thinks Morganton and CoMMA is a launching pad for the play. He

said he would like to see a North Carolina tour of the play and has already made contacts with Flat Rock Playhouse and Blowing Rock Stage Company.

Bouser and Wilson both said the ultimate goal would be to have the play produced for the Ford Theater in Washington, D.C., for the 30th anniversary of Watergate next year.

There are two school performances slated, for Oct. 24 at 9 and 11 a.m. and invitational dress rehearsal Oct. 25 at 8:15 p.m. There will be a gala performance on Saturday, Oct. 26, at 8:15 p.m. and a matinee on Sunday, Oct. 27, at 3 p.m.

Proceeds from the play will benefit the J.D. Fitz Scholarship Fund. The scholarships go to local students and Wilson said, "This is an opportunity to get these scholarships up so we can give the students more than laundry money."

The Rotary Club will be selling 200 \$100 patron seats to underwrite the production and secure funding. All other tickets will be general admission and those tickets will range from \$12.50 to \$20. Student tickets will be \$3.

Regardless whether the play goes beyond Morganton, Wilson said, "If the play does well here, we've won."