

As Center Stage's house lights dimmed on May 3, 2004, second-year University of Maryland law student Marianne R. Koch sat in her seat, anxious for the first and only performance of *Brown v. Board Revisited: A Commemoration and Community Forum* to begin. It was not a new feeling for Koch. She'd been to numerous plays at this and other theaters, and had acted in just as many during high school and college. But this time, it was different.

Thirteen spotlights hit thirteen chairs lined up in front of the stage. As the performers walked single file to the chairs and readied their scripts on music stands, Koch's excitement—and scholarly curiosity—grew. She and fellow law student Roneith Hibbert ('04) had spent nearly three months during the previous winter on research in preparation for the evening's original adaptation of the five *Brown v. Board of Education* cases. "I hadn't read the final script since [our research] was completed in January," says Koch. "I was amazed to recognize a lot of arguments word for word. [Playwright Jerome Hairston] did a great job and stayed true to the transcripts."

Guided by Professor of Law Katherine L. Vaughns, Hibbert and Koch acted as volunteer "research assistants/dramaturges," choosing concepts and issues in the transcripts that would lend themselves to a compelling reading. An early meeting with Gavin Witt, Center Stage's resident dramaturg and the production's director, provided insight into what types of information the playwright would find helpful. Once the research was complete, Witt sent it to Hairston, who used it to craft his adaptation. "In law school, you're mostly reading judges' opinions," says Koch, who plans to practice public interest law. "In this case, we read the wonderfully well-crafted arguments from the lawyers. I'll remember that when I'm in practice."



The real *Brown* came to life via cast members Andre M. Davis, District Judge, District Court for the District of Maryland and Robert M. Bell, Chief Judge, Maryland Court of Appeals, introduced by Center Stage trustee and lawyer Philip Andrews. Professor Katherine Vaughns recruited volunteers for the "play."

The idea for the unique community commemoration came from a likely source—Harry Johnson, Esq., ('79), president of the Maryland State Bar Association and a Center Stage trustee—in an unlikely setting. A year ago, Johnson ran into Michael Ross, Center Stage's managing director, at the gym, and suggested a community event for the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ross, who had produced a similar reading of the Amistad court proceedings at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, agreed. Professor Vaughns (also a Center Stage trustee) then jumped on board and recruited student volunteers. Several organizations collaborated with the School of Law and Center Stage to

produce the singular community event, including the Maryland State Bar Association, the Bar Association of Baltimore City, and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture. "Actors" were cast from Baltimore's legal, civic, educational, and cultural communities, including Chief Judge Robert M. Bell,

member, Board of Visitors, UM School of Law; Judge Andre M. Davis ('78), also adjunct faculty; Larry S. Gibson, professor of law; and Harry Johnson himself.

For Koch and the 400-plus audience members, it was an experience not soon forgotten. During the post-performance discussion, the audience and cast members spoke openly about the landmark case and its impact on education and communities today.

"With theater, you are dealing with a medium and venue that is readily made present," explains Vaughns. "It puts a human face on things. I was very pleased and proud of the role our students had in the event. I also think it's important for the community to be aware of the law school's interests in these issues and the role that the law plays in our society."

The *Brown v. Board Revisited* event wrapped up a year of formal collaborations between the University of Maryland School of Law and regional theaters. A September event built on the true-life race relations of Baltimore's "Buddy Deane Show" as played out in the touring production of *Hairspray* at the Morris A. Mechanic Theatre. And a November program used the cast and the subject matter of *The Exonerated*—also playing at the Mechanic—to help more than two hundred

Baltimore City public high school students grapple with tough issues about the death penalty.

BUDDY DEANE LIVES ON

"*Hairspray* addresses race issues in an in-your-face way," explains Taunya Lovell Banks, Jacob A. France Professor of Equality Jurisprudence. At the suggestion of Dean Karen H. Rothenberg, Banks, who teaches the John Waters movie in her Law and Film class, developed the program, "*Hairspray* in Context—Race, Rock 'n' Roll, and Baltimore," as a crash course in Baltimore's racial climate in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On September 14, 2003, during the national touring debut of the hit Broadway musical *Hairspray*, the law school invited alumni to a brunch and panel discussion at Westminster Hall before the group attended the matinee at the Mechanic. Banks led the standing-room-only crowd of 200 in a lively, seminar-style discussion, complete with an accompanying multimedia presentation and booklet that read like a race relations primer. She enthusiastically credits the event's success to remarks by panelist Marie Fischer Cooke, JD ('85), a trial attorney in Baltimore and one of the original "committee" members on "The Buddy Deane Show," Baltimore's segregated teen dance television show on which Waters' fictional "Corny Collins Show" is based.

"That drew people in, as a real live person talked about her contrasting experience of going to the integrated Western High School, then going to dance on 'The Buddy Deane Show,'" explains Banks. "Marie had danced with a black guy at a dance on the Eastern Shore and got in trouble for it. She was living proof of a Tracy Turnblad [*Hairspray*'s rotund rebel who integrates the fictional dance show], an outsider who crashed in and has more progressive views than the people on the show." Baltimore's "Buddy Deane Show" did not have a Hollywood ending, though. In January 1964, a few months after a group of white and black student protestors staged a surprise, on-air integration, the show was cancelled. But the Broadway production of *Hairspray*, now in its second year, and its national touring version, show no signs of slowing down.

BRINGING THE DEATH PENALTY TO LIFE

For a few hours last November 16, celebrated actors Lynn Redgrave and Robert Carradine tried on new roles: law school professors. After performing at Baltimore's Mechanic Theatre in *The Exonerated*, a powerful drama about six

real-life death penalty cases, the actors participated in a discussion organized and led by Michael A. Millemann, Jacob A. France Professor of Public Interest Law. As applause for the production melted into stunned silence over the play's harrowing, heart-wrenching stories, Redgrave introduced Millemann—who would lead a discussion of the play's themes—to an audience of 120 law school alumni and friends, general theatergoers, and 200 students from inner-city Baltimore public high schools. For the students, the play and the post-play presentation capped a week of discussions about the death penalty, led by nine volunteer law students as part of the law school's Community Law In Action (CLIA) program. Mark Sissman ('78), then president and CEO of the Hippodrome Foundation, worked closely with Dean Rothenberg to involve the School of Law during the play's two-week run at the Mechanic. For most of the students, this was their first introduction to professional theater. The subject matter, though, was far from new. "[The students] likely...had more, and certainly different, experiences with the criminal justice system, and hope and despair than the traditional patrons," Millemann explains. The play's stark production—no set design, scenery, or costumes, just actors on stools portraying innocent people eventually exonerated after serving two to twenty-two years on death row—hit home with audience members, regardless of age, race, or cultural background.


Millemann was equally familiar with the play's harsh subject matter. An expert on the death penalty, he argued five death penalty cases while practicing law in Florida, and currently teaches the Death Penalty Seminar. He felt that the play, while edgy, was a good fit for CLIA, the law school's five-year-old community and leadership development course for six inner-city high schools. Co-founded by Millemann and directed by Terry Hickey ('98), CLIA is what Millemann dubs "civics in action—where they teach the basics of government." During the matinee, more than half of the questions posed to Millemann and the actors came from the students. High school teachers, who had taught alongside the law students, continued to moderate discussions on the bus rides home and well into the coming weeks.

"Art brings the power to the story," says Millemann. "It's 'bottom-up' teaching...when you have the story first and work backwards to the law and larger social policy issues. It provokes not only a rational response but emotional and spiritual responses."

LET THE SHOW GO ON

Prior to the 2003-2004 school year, the School of Law's curricular use of the region's dramatic offerings was limited to informal pre- or postperformance talks led by a faculty member. Rothenberg hopes this past year's success will inspire more collaborations.

"The Hippodrome Foundation, Inc. [formerly the Baltimore Center for the Performing Arts, Inc.] has been very supportive, and I hope that we will continue to expand partnerships in the future," she says. With the stage set for the innovative use of theatrical enhancements to the curricula—and a renovated Hippodrome Theater, now with the France-Merrick Performing Arts Center, literally down the block from the law school, Rothenberg sees these endeavors as an "opportunity to share with the larger community and a way to engage faculty and use their level of expertise in a different way."

A self-described "frustrated musical comedy actress," Rothenberg laughingly admits that she is living somewhat vicariously through the law school's recent theatrical ventures. But the mission runs far deeper than avocational leanings. "Theater is a natural way to use drama and words in a different context to bring to life issues that are difficult to talk about. My hope is that we can expand this with our growing reputation and be seen regionally and nationally as a law school that places theater in context and uses it to foster a new understanding of complex social issues." 

Sarah Achenbach, who enjoys a little drama in her own life, writes from her home in Baltimore, Md.



The discussions following the presentation of *The Exonerated* brought Professor Michael Millemann's Death Penalty seminar issues to life.



Professor Taunya Banks brought law school graduate—and Buddy Deane committee member—Marie Fischer in to present personal experience of *Hairspray's* racial issues.

ALL RISE!

This past year, Law School faculty, students, and alumni married the law and the dramatic arts in three innovative ways with regional theaters, each worthy of a standing ovation.

BY SARAH ACHENBACH

