

New Outdoor Drama To Open in Robeson

From Staff Reports

PEMBROKE — A 20-foot-tall mound of earth behind Riverside County Club is the first tangible sign that an original outdoor drama about Robeson County's history will premiere here in time for America's Bicentennial.

Audiences at the drama, entitled "Strike at the Wind!", will sit in seats arranged in tiers on the side of the mound. The play, which depicts the story of Henry Berry Lowrie, a Lumbee Indian freedom fighter, folk hero, Robin Hood and outlaw, was written by Dr. Randolph Umberger of Chapel Hill, a protege of outdoor drama master Paul Green.

"The amphitheater faces a lake, with the lake serving as a natural, scenic backdrop for the play," said Rock Kershaw, general manager of the Robeson Historical Drama Association. "At the end of the week we should be constructing seats.

"We've just completed the first stage of the amphitheater — building the mound," Kershaw said. "We were unique in having to build it.

"Most outdoor dramas in this state take place on the coast or in the mountains where they can place the amphitheater on the side of a mountain or on a sand dune. Since Robeson County is flat, swampy land, we had to build this incredible hill."

The incredible hill is 20 feet high, 160 feet

long and 150 feet wide. Local Jaycees, working at night after their regular jobs are finished, will help a skeleton crew of workmen build the 1,000 seats on the mound.

"We want an earthy, natural look. We don't need a whole lot of skilled carpentry like on the inside of a house," Kershaw said.

The drama was conceived in 1968 by a group of Robeson County civic and business leaders who wanted to tell how the county was built by the labors of three races of people. Robeson County has an almost equal balance of whites, blacks and Indians.

Lowrie, a folk hero to the Indians, was considered an outlaw by authorities. He and his gang hid out on the banks of the Lumber River and made guerrilla raids against the warring armies.

"There was a great deal of tension during the Civil War because Lumbees were suspected of harboring Union soldiers," Kershaw said. "The Lumbees weren't allowed to vote or bear arms or have any legal rights — similar to blacks at the time."

Funds raised by the community and from several grants, including some from the N.C. Department of Natural and Economic Resources and the N.C. Bicentennial Committee, helped bring the drama to fruition. The organizers are holding their breath, Kershaw

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STRIKE AT THE WIND—With rehearsal for "Strike At The Wind!" in full swing, Derek Lowrey takes a breather to go over some lines. Derek plays Indian folk hero Henry Berry Lowrie. "Strike At The Wind!" written by Randy Umberger of Chapel Hill, is the true story of the Lumbee people following the Civil War. Officially recognized by the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration in Washington, D.C., the outdoor drama premieres July 1-August 14 at the new Lakeside Amphitheatre at the Riverside Country Club near Pembroke in Robeson County. For reservations, call (919) 521-2401.

Indian drama has staying power

PEMBROKE — Skeptics questioned the good judgment of placing an outdoor drama in Pembroke, because of the number of outdoor dramas given in North Carolina, beginning 40 years ago with "The Lost Colony" in Manteo.

Observers said "Strike at the Wind!" would slip away like the other dramas which began in 1976, the year of the U.S. bicentennial. But Saturday "Strike at the Wind!" opened for its fifth season at the Lakeside Amphitheater just outside Pembroke.

"'Strike at the Wind' has lasted when others failed due to effective management," said Rock Kershaw, the general manager of Robeson Historical Drama Inc., which produces the show. Kershaw was the manager when the show premiered in 1976, but he left to join "The Lost Colony" in 1978 and moved on to the North Light Theater in Chicago in 1979.

"Two other factors keep 'Strike at the Wind!' coming back every year," said Kershaw. "Each year a good portion of our original cast returns. They're all local people who have great pride in taking part in the show."

"The most important reason for continued success is the story," continued Kershaw. "Randolph Umberger (the playwright) has incorporated fact with legends about the main character, Henry Ber-

ry Lowrie. In the play, Umberger has created a strong, catchy story line which interests young and old."

The fact that the Lakeside Amphitheater is located on the site where much of the play's action takes place adds to the authenticity of the show, according to Kershaw. Lowrie was a leader of the Lumbee Indians in Robeson County during the Civil War era, according to the history books. The facts about his life are sketchy, but legends abound about his exploits and his fate.

In four years "Strike at the Wind!" has played to nearly 50,000 persons, Kershaw said. Its season runs from July 5 to Aug. 30.

"The show has made its mark on the area and the state," said Kershaw, "but what most people don't know is that the behind-the-scenes activity is as exciting as the show itself."

For instance, because the production is professional but non-profit, funds must be raised every year to put on the show, said Kershaw. "Because of the income gap between expenses and funds raised by ticket sales, there will always be that challenge."

Kershaw said an income gap does not signify poor management or over-spending. "No one in this business is getting rich," he said. "While costs remain high, salaries are low. Actors make be-

tween \$100 and \$425 per season — including about 250 work hours."

Most of the workers do their jobs as a labor of love, according to Kershaw. Some are looking for experience and others enjoy the theater as a creative outlet.

"Strike at the Wind!" has about 15 staff members employed through the Lumbee Regional Development Association and the Robeson County Department of Human Resources on CETA* programs. Their jobs include box office, accounting, public relations and general office duties.

"As a professional show, 'Strike at the Wind!' will continue to be a viable contribution to the arts in North Carolina as long as the necessary local financial support continues," said Kershaw. "Since ticket sales amount to about 35 percent of our operating budget, other money must come from various private and public funding sources."

Twenty-five performances will be presented this summer and plans are being made for the coming years. "The future of 'Strike at the Wind!' depends on planning, not from season to season but for five years at the time," said Kershaw. "We're all committed to the permanence of this show."

Information and reservations are available from "Strike at the Wind!" Box 1059, Pembroke 28358, telephone 521-3112.