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Arts

BY JONATHAN ALCORN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Director Julie Taymor was initially reluctant to take on the film about painter Frida Kahlo's stormy life.

Letting 'Frida' Ring

For Julie Taymor, Project Was Rocky & Rich With Possibility

By ALONA WARTOFSKY
Special to The Washington Post

NEW YORK

Director Julie Taymor is trying to discuss her new film on the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, but she's having trouble concentrating. Several rooms away in the downtown loft she shares with her partner, composer Elliot Goldenthal, he is noisily preparing dinner.

She winces at what sounds like bowling with crockery. "Most composers are very good cooks," she says. "It's really composition."

Their dinner guest is Caetano Veloso, the Brazilian superstar who, on the film's soundtrack, sings a song that Taymor wrote with Goldenthal. But Veloso isn't coming for a while—he's spending the first part of the evening taking in another of Taymor's creations, the wildly successful stage version of "The Lion King." And since Goldenthal is doing the cooking, Taymor has plenty of time to talk about Frida, the artist and the movie.

Frida Kahlo, who died in 1954 at the age of 47, is celebrated as much for her extraordinary life as for her provocative, surrealistic self-portraits. After being injured in a bus accident at age 18, she endured dozens of operations and lengthy recoveries. The accident left her unable to bear children, and her miscarriages are graphically represented in several of her works. When she was 20 she married painter Diego Rivera, who was 22 years her senior and extremely fat. Like Kahlo, the great muralist Rivera was an art-world celebrity, a man widely known as a compulsive philanderer. Their marriage was turbulent—he slept with countless women, including, for a time, her sister, while Kahlo slept with both men and women, including some

See TAYMOR, G6, Col. 1

The Other Side of An Era

During a Time of Segregation in a Place Known for Its Turmoil, Henry Clay Anderson's Lens Captured the Forgotten Joys of the Quotidian

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDERSON LLC

By WIL HAYGOOD
Washington Post Staff Writer

As both boy and man, Henry Clay Anderson had nerve. He took to romping around Mississippi plantations, snapping photos, a little boy with a cheap camera around his thin wrists. As a man, after World War II, he wanted to become a serious photographer. A Negro photographer. In 1946 in Mississippi. That was a mighty dream. But there he was, climbing up on porches, knocking on screen doors, taking his "portraits" because he didn't really like calling them pictures. He got his training on the GI Bill at Southern University in Baton Rouge. He then returned to Mississippi, to Greenville, and opened Anderson Photo Service right there on Edison Street. A lifetime of shutter clicks, a lifetime of nearly unknown work. Then, in 1998, the boy who became the man who became the Mississippi photographer died.

Anderson's portraits—"Separate, but Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson"—have been gathered here for the first time, and they are fairly astonishing. The reasons are varied, but principally this: The Mississippi that we know is one of crushing poverty and murderous deeds done in owlish darkness. But horror did not come to every Mississippi family, just as not all Mississippi blacks lived hand to mouth. Poverty and hurt are part of the Mississippi legacy, true enough, but Henry Clay Anderson swung his camera, lanternlike, in other directions.

The hidden middle class was of little interest to the outside journalists and essayists who arrived in Mississippi. But the families themselves lived their lives and climbed their internal mountains. Anderson, a native Mississippian, knew this world. His work has little, if anything, to do with civil rights, with the terror and murders that scarred Mississippi in those much written of decades—the '40s, '50s and '60s. There is a sheer and quiet luminosity to this photographer's work. These are portraits of black folk in their living rooms, women attending beauty pageants, gentlemen dressed to the nines, smiling

See ANDERSON, G7, Col. 1

Glimpses of normalcy and elegance in an antagonistic age: "The Prom Couple," top, and "A Beauty Pageant" are am[ong] images from the 1940s, '50s and '60s in "Separate, but Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDERSON LLC

A sheer and quiet luminosity: The Rabbit Foot Minstrels vaudeville troupe passed through Greenville—and before Henry Clay Anderson's lens—on some unrecorded date in the not-so-distant past. Ditto the apparent sharecropper and his family who posed in Anderson's studio on Edison Street. At left, below, Anderson in a 1965 campaign photo when he ran for the city council.

Lost & Found in Mississippi

ANDERSON, From G1

children in doll-like clothing. Living rooms with old Victrolas and period furniture; tailfinned cars; ballrooms brimming with prom couples.

So we get a portrait of a young couple—looking into Anderson's faithful lens with a good degree of insouciance—on the dance floor at a prom. The young man is in a one-button tux with a white boutonniere, his date in a flowing white dress and white gloves, with a tiara upon her head. Did her mother fuss over her, over her dress? Were there tears in mother's eyes as daughter sailed off into the night air? Did the couple leave Mississippi for a college up north, or did they stay and go to one of the Negro colleges—Tougaloo, Jackson State? On the other side of Anderson's lens, they look unstoppable. And they seem a couple out of royal London, not little Greenville, Miss.

There is a photo of a line of Mississippi bathing beauty contestants, strolling by a cabana and a gaggle of schoolage children. Maybe they got their bathing suits from some mail-order catalogue way up North, maybe they arrived in boxes from some exotic place like New York City, or Los Angeles. Whatever deeds were going on in the minds of others in the state of Mississippi during the afternoon of this event seems inconsequential. Seems irrelevant. There is beauty to applaud in the form of an all-American home-grown beauty pageant. There are photos of musicians, of vaudevillians traveling through town, of a lone man in pompadour hairdo and wearing a pair of white buck shoes, holding a guitar and wearing a pair of white buck shoes. Are his dollar bills folded inside a money clip in his pocket? Does he send telegrams to a sweetheart someplace? (The photos are without captions, so the mind wanders.)

Why, another musician, and this would be a young smiling B.B. King, at a celebration with a birthday cake, surrounded by smiles, in someone's home, the cake decorated with a guitar. Bottles of Coke on the table. Maybe that very night B.B. has been onstage sweating, strumming the guitar he often referred to as Lucille.

Who knows if Anderson's subjects ever saw his work? Or cared to see it? Maybe the moment of posing was fine experience enough—of sitting there and being looked at, admired. Who knows if the vaudevillians—the Rabbit Foot Minstrels—ever saw themselves through his lens after they loaded up their truck, pulled out of town and vanished? But there they are, lined up together, seated, outside their traveling truck, which has a huge advertisement on the side: "The Greatest Colored Show on Earth."

B.B. and Lucille would surely be gone by the time Anderson got around to developing his negatives.

In all the literature written about Mississippi, its history, Greenville has always come off as a tolerant place. There wasn't viciousness behind the segregation. Greenville wasn't Belzoni and it wasn't Philadelphia. It was where Hodding Carter published his Delta Democrat-Times, a newspaper that achieved some renown for championing civil rights. Greenville wasn't without its own racial woes, but it was considered more civil than many other places on the Mississippi map.

Henry Clay Anderson married Sadie Lee, but the couple never had children. He did some ministering, ran for political office (and lost), taught school. They were things to make a living, to keep food on the table. But it was always back to the photo studio. A camera in the car seat, a road to drive down, a meeting hall where he could set up his roving studio. "I entered business in Greenville in 1948," Anderson once told an interviewer. "My brother was there as manager of the local office of Security Life Insurance Company, along with James Carter's Cleaners, Brown's Pastry Shop, Mrs. Bailey's Cafe, the Casablanca. There were many others, but these were the most important ones."

Some of the pictures show, in the slightest way, class distinctions among blacks who sat before Anderson. The man in the plaid shirt and brimmed hat, holding a child, his wife beside him, seems far more rural than many others captured on film. There is a weariness in both the man's and woman's eyes: Perhaps theirs has been a sharecropping life, perhaps they are in from the fields. Even the small child in the man's lap seems forlorn. It's as if all three of them—the woes of the parents dropped into the child like rainwater—have simply been Mississippied up. But they are the exceptions in this chronicle.

More of Anderson's gift: A couple's wedding ceremony, one of the guests holding a whirring fan close to them in those pre-air-conditioning days. Another young couple, outside their small home. She's on the front porch, knitting something, he has a desk out in the yard and is poring over a book, taking notes. Maybe he's studying for a real estate exam. Maybe he's taking correspondence courses. A teeny bit of baby can be seen in the bassinet. Everywhere Anderson catches both normalcy and elegance, grace under the pressures of whatever rages might be in the Mississippi air, in the wind. A family of 11 poses outside their home, dressed in what must be their Sunday best. The three little children are to the left and right of the woman in the middle. She's obviously the matriarch, the mother and grandmother. Did she pick cotton? Did she know men and women born in slavery? Do her bones ache? Does her husband—who is not pictured—lie underground? Does she loathe Mississippi? Or love it?

And what of the three men on the porch swing, all in evening wear? They seem to be in their late twenties. The night air drapes about them. They look like they've just come from a swank affair. But was it in Greenville, or maybe all the way over in citified Jackson, the state capital? Do they have gold-plated cigarette lighters in the inside pockets of their lovely tuxedo jackets? Are their dates just out of view, giggling and scenting the air with their perfume?

Looking into the camera with optimism and a ferociousness of pride: Clockwise from above, B.B. King takes the cake—or helps cut it, anyway; a bride and groom try not to sweat it; and three dapper guys get into the swing of things.

It is explained, in one of the essays accompanying this book, that Shawn Wilson, a young filmmaker from Greenville—his mother once wound up in Anderson's studio—rediscovered Anderson's work when he made a return visit home. Anderson seemed a little befuddled, and allowed that the only person who had ever interviewed him was a college student. Wilson sensed value in Anderson's work and got in touch with Charles Schwartz, a collector. The two traveled to Mississippi shortly after Anderson's death. They found thousands of prints beneath the kitchen sink. Many were damaged. Wilson and Schwartz got the attention of the New York publishing house that eventually agreed to print the lost photographic legacy of the Mississippi photographer.

There were, of course, times when Henry Clay Anderson couldn't avoid danger. It came with the murder of the Rev. George Lee in Belzoni in 1955. (Why is it that Mississippi, of any state in the country, seems to have towns and cities with the softest names, the most lyrical of names: Belzoni, Itta Bena; Anderson himself was born in a place called Nitta Yuma.) Rev. Lee had been trying to register blacks to vote. He was shot dead on May 7, 1955. Anderson went to Belzoni to photograph what he could. The portrait artist was shaking. "It was a fearsome night for me, one of the most fearsome nights in my life, the night I made pictures of Reverend Lee's funeral," Anderson would recall. Anderson aimed his camera right into the coffin of Lee and there, on the man's jawline, was a ghastly wound: Lee had been shot in the face. It is little wonder that Anderson's first national exposure, in Time and Life, came as a result of the Lee killing.

So the man wasn't a photojournalist. He shook in his shoes at the sight of mayhem. And yet, there's another photo here, of a car with two holes in the front windows. That's a car that's been eluding dangerous strangers during the rumblings of a Mississippi civil rights night.

But the man's heart and craft lay in his portraits of folk who stared at a camera with optimism and—damn the uncertainties around them—a ferociousness of pride.

How did the little brown-skinned girl find the brown-skinned doll she clutches in 1950s Mississippi? Was it made in someone's home? Was it left beneath a tree at Christmastime?

By the time Anderson died he was a widower, living alone in Greenville, just the man and his negatives. By all accounts, he was a simple man. And an artist. Throughout his working life, he managed to capture a Mississippi that enthralled him. And yet, he wondered in his last days if he had just been "thrown away and nothing was cared about me." These photographs prove otherwise.

"Separate, but Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson," with essays by Shawn Wilson, Clifton L. Taulbert and Mary Panzer (151 pages; $35 hardcover), is published by Public Affairs, New York.