

COLQUITT, GEORGIA

Swamp Gravy

“The dish we call swamp gravy is a kind of gumbo sometimes served at fish fries. It’s making nourishment out of whatever you have at hand. You use fish drippings, and hot peppers, vegetables, fish pieces, shrimp, whatever, put it together, stir it up, and maybe add some hush puppies,” says Karen Kimbrel, Swamp Gravy’s Executive Director. The play called Swamp Gravy, now in its tenth year, is what its artistic creator, Richard Alan Geer, calls “an experiment in a form of community performance—oral-history based, large-scale, professionally produced amateur theater” which celebrates the lives and stories of the residents, black and white, of Colquitt and Miller County, Georgia.

The play is presented for four three-performance weeks each Fall and Spring, and tours elsewhere, with its one hundred cast members, five to seven times a year. But, even more notably, the play and what Kimbrel calls its “transforming effects” have created a wide variety of social interactions and institutions, all still under the umbrella of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council, which sponsors Swamp Gravy.

The Arts Council now owns four buildings and is developing a fifth. A 15,000-square-foot converted cotton warehouse contains the theatre, a Museum of Southern Cultures, and “a community area where folks can sit and visit, or have meetings and weddings.” An arts and education building rents space to the Board of Education and sponsors adult education seminars and classes offered by the alternative school and the community college. A third building is for the Arts Council’s Youth Program (for Grades 9-12) and for the activities of the New Vision Coalition, a program for African-American children in Grades K through 8, founded by two black cast members of Swamp Gravy “with the goal of keeping kids in school and away from drugs and alcohol.” A fourth building, a market building on the square in the center of town, contains four low-income apartments and a crafts, folk art, and antique mall. In development is a fifth building, dubbed the New Life Learning Center, which is “designed as a training center for people on public assistance. We will have programs in African-American quilt-making, traditional pottery and basket-making, and Hospitality—skills such as waiting, hosting, cleaning, and reception. Tourism is Georgia’s number two industry, and besides, the Arts Council also owns a big bed and breakfast in town.”

“All these projects,” continues Kimbrel, “came out of—and continue to be nourished by—our coming together as a community to make Swamp Gravy. We have all these things as part of our mission. We’re in the ninth poorest congressional district in the US; our poverty is obscene. As an organization, we are a little odd. Other arts councils sometimes look a little distressed when I describe our activities. And, on the other side, I have to say that I was a drop-out from the Georgia Economic Development Academy. They invited me up there, but all I could write on my papers was ‘think outside the box.’ Arts projects bring us together; then we can make other things to combat racism and social injustice.”

Contact: www.swampgravy.com

912-758-5450