

## Mountain Xpress article

"The play is about the effect the mountain is having on the people," explains William Gregg about *Mountain of Hope*, the original drama he co-wrote with Perry Deane Young.

To that end, Mt. Mitchell, that popular tourist attraction, had to be thoughtfully invoked.

"The set design incorporates an image of Mt. Mitchell that makes it omnipresent," notes Gregg.

Moviemaking staples such as quick-fade lighting, vintage photos and sound effects will further enhance the play, to be debuted by Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre on July 7.

Creating a world-premiere play is hard work. But 150 years ago, Mt. Mitchell was having an even more profound "effect on the people" – or rather, on two people in particular: beloved professor and outdoorsman Elisha Mitchell, and his brilliant but devious, unstable and ultimately institutionalized student, Thomas L. Clingman.

Mitchell, a brilliant UNC-Chapel Hill science professor, had rightly identified as the highest mountain east of the Mississippi River the peak that would one day bear his name. (It stands 6,684 feet high.)

But in an act of unconscionable jealousy, Clingman tried to steal for himself the glory due his former teacher, claiming that Mitchell had not actually climbed his mountain, and that a Tennessee peak, ultimately named Clingman's Dome, was actually the highest (it turned out to only measure 6,643 feet). A little-liked member of Congress at the time, Clingman even had Mitchell's name deleted from all official maps.

At age 64, Mitchell insisted on re-tracing the journey up his mountain to prove the truthfulness of his claim.

"That mountain will never lie to anybody about anything," his character says in the play. "My hope lies in that mountain."

And so, ultimately, would his death: Mitchell's fateful hike to validate his disputed claim ended when he plummeted from the top of a waterfall.

It wasn't till years after the professor's tragic demise that things got straightened out, the facts righted.

"Few people know the true story behind Mt. Mitchell State Park," says play co-writer Young. "In 1915, [it was] dedicated as the first state park in the country."

Like slippery mountain trails, any new play, too, is fraught with danger – particularly one featuring 12 actors whose lines must be spoken in the eloquent language drawn directly from historical records.

"It's great to have mature, seasoned actors," Gregg says. "I can trust their instincts. I wouldn't even attempt a new play otherwise."

As with Mitchell and Clingman before them, collaborators Young and Gregg – a novelist and the current artistic director of SART, respectively – are 20 years apart in age. Both men are self-avowed "history nuts,"

each having descended from families who've been in North Carolina since before the Revolutionary War. Both were born in Woodfin and graduated from Erwin High School.

In 2001, they co-wrote the acclaimed play *Frankie*, a tragedy that dramatized the complicated story of Frankie Silver, hanged in 1833 in Morganton for murdering her abusive husband.

This time, the villain is easier to establish.

To reflect "the wildness" of Clingman the man, Gregg says he told the sound designer: "I need a pileated woodpecker."

"A what?" the technician reportedly responded.

"But he found it," reveals Gregg with a laugh.

In particular, Gregg was looking for what he describes as "that awful sound the woodpecker makes."

Says Young of the fame-stealer's stunt: "It was a dastardly thing."

– Xpress Staff

---

As part of Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre's 30th season, the world premiere of William Gregg and Perry Deane Young's *Mountain of Hope* will show at Mars Hill College's Owen Theatre from Wednesday, July 7, through Sunday, July 11, and again from Thursday, July 15, through Sunday, July 18. There will be three 2:30 p.m. matinees, on July 11, 15 and 18; all other shows will begin at 7:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$23. Call (828) 689-1239 or visit [www.sartheatre.com](http://www.sartheatre.com) to make reservations and for more information.