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Jo Carson's Contribution to the Swamp Gravy Recipe

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JO CARSON’S CONTRIBUTION
TO THE SWAMP GRAVY RECIPE

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ABSTRACT

Swamp Gravy, an oral history/community performance project in Colquitt, Georgia, has been named Georgia’s “Official Folk Life Play,” received critical acclaim, and earned grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Georgia Arts Council, the Woodruff Foundation, among others. This dissertation, Jo Carson’s Contribution to the Swamp Gravy Recipe, introduces the project, examines the elements found in its plays, and discusses the writing of Jo Carson as an important component in the Swamp Gravy phenomenon. She shapes disparate stories into unified scripts, using folklife details and a feminist perspective. Her writing results in a blend of the folklife play and southern drama, accommodates large amateur casts, and insures the success of the community performance project.

The first chapter looks at Carson’s career before Swamp Gravy to identify characteristic elements of her work. Her earlier writing includes a volume of poetry, stories i ain’t told nobody yet; children’s books, Pulling My Leg, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You, and The Great Shaking; a short story collection, The Last of the ‘Waltz Across Texas’ and Other Stories; and two plays, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride and Daytrips. They all share oral history and folk life elements, which lend verisimilitude, and resonate with the stories and speech of ordinary people. In her plays, she adds strains of southern drama and liberal feminism to establish the structural and thematic base for the Swamp Gravy plays.

The next four chapters discuss how oral history, folk life, southern drama, and feminist elements from these earlier works inform the Swamp Gravy plays. Chapter Six presents Dr. Richard Owen Geer’s community performance model and discusses the restrictions it places on Carson’s writing. The development of oral history project is traced in Chapter Two while Chapter Three discusses the definition for folklife, compares the folklife play to folk drama, and situates the Swamp Gravy plays in the folklife
category. Carson’s plays are then examined based on their evidence of folklife details, and their significance is discussed. Chapter Four talks about Swamp Gravy as both traditional Aristotelian drama and southern drama and attempts to show how these elements result in plays and not just storytelling scenes. Chapter Five discusses the influence of liberal and radical feminism on Carson’s writing. All of the elements of oral history, folk life, southern drama, and liberal feminism add to the success of the plays. However, Chapter Six looks at the limitations of the community performance model and elaborates on Carson’s techniques for minimizing the lack of experience and talent of the amateur cast and lack of rehearsal time for the plays. It also discusses the successes and failures of Geer’s theater “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

The conclusion, Chapter Seven comments on the continuation of the Swamp Gravy project in Colquitt, notes its impact on other communities, and tracks Carson’s work after Swamp Gravy. This dissertation hopes to promote an academic awareness of Jo Carson as a playwright and to establish Swamp Gravy as an influential community performance project.
INTRODUCTION

Swamp gravy is a part of my south Georgia childhood; it is the dish I associate with fish fries and with my uncles, W.B. and Leslie. While several other stories exist about its origin, one local raconteur, W. H. Phillips, credits my Uncle W.B. with naming this culinary creation from which Swamp Gravy, the oral history/community performance project in Colquitt, Georgia, takes its name. The men folks would go off on fishing trips to Spring Creek, Lake Seminole, or Dead Lakes. They would catch some fish, drink some whiskey, come in, clean the fish, and drink some more whiskey. After dark, the designated cooks would fry up the fish, then mix up a batch of hushpuppies and a favorite side dish, something the men threw together to accompany the main course. Finally if the fishermen were still sober enough, they would all eat. According to Phillips, on one such occasion, as the men were all sitting around on the creek bank enjoying the good cooking, Uncle W. B. pointed to the side dish and said in his slow, matter-of-fact way, “W.H., how ‘bout passin’ me some more  of that swamp gravy?” The name for the dish stuck.

I never attended one of those men-only fish fries, but while growing up, I often heard about them. Usually if one of my uncles was cooking fish and swamp gravy for family members, he would retell that story and laugh at it again. So my earliest recollections of that delicious-smelling concoction are intermixed with memories of their storytelling. And their swamp gravy not only smelled good; it tasted good. I always preferred it to the fried catfish or bream. While listening to their stories and watching my uncles make swamp gravy, I learned how to make it myself.

Swamp Gravy is a savory stew made of ordinary ingredients. It starts with the cook leaving fish drippings, those cracklings of corn meal that come off the fish as they fry, and a little grease in the bottom of the fish cooker. Potatoes are peeled and cubed and added to the base. Next come the onions, chopped finer than the potatoes. These two ingredients simmer until done, with the potatoes reaching the optimum doneness, soft but not mushy, and the onions are tender not crunchy. If cooked properly, not too slowly or
not too fast, both the potatoes and onions end up with brown edges on them, which somehow add to their taste. Then tomatoes, fresh or canned, are cut up and poured in. The seasoning comes next. After the usual salt and pepper have been sprinkled on, the cook brings out the secret ingredient. Some people use Tabasco to give swamp gravy its punch while others swear by Louisiana hot sauce. However, my uncles always opted for the pepper sauce they had bottled themselves. The cook decides how much is just the right amount. The final step is to give the concoction an appealing color with the addition of enough store-bought catsup. Because the recipe obviously lacks preciseness, the cook alone determines the success or failure of swamp gravy. Its deliciousness, that is, its success, comes from the cook’s skill in combining those unremarkable, separate ingredients to create a new, unexpectedly delectable dish.

So that is what swamp gravy is to most south Georgians, but the term, “swamp gravy,” with caps added has a new meaning to the people of Colquitt, Georgia, and its visitors. Along with still being great at a fish fry, it is now the name of an oral history/community performance project. Just like its namesake, Swamp Gravy relies on common elements to yield uncommon results. In 1991, the newly-organized Colquitt/Miller Arts Council met to discuss the possibility of creating a play about the community. At that first session arts council officers, along with out-of-town visitor, Richard Geer, tried to decide on a workable plan. Many ideas and many objectives and objections surfaced. Before adjourning, the group decided to go ahead with this project; and to make it official, a name was needed for this performance dream. Because the project reminded Dot Wainright so much of the southern dish, swamp gravy, she suggested that name. Now over a decade later, the project continues to flourish, and people are still asking, “What exactly is Swamp Gravy?”

When Karen Smith Kimbrel, former executive director of the project, first heard about it, she felt compelled to write a song. She said of Swamp Gravy, “It’s a mixture of everyone’s taste, warm and good and nothing to waste. It’s taking what you have and making it something unique.” Kimbrel’s lyrics are indeed a good summation of the project’s design. It is familiar, yet new. This community performance project is not to be confused with the little theater concept in which an existing work by a well-known, professional playwright is performed by local amateurs under the artistic guidance of a
professorial director. Nor is it synonymous with hometown pageants or heritage plays, chronological accounts of history presented in elaborate costumes to glorify a specific place or event. According to Geer, a performance studies scholar and the first artistic director for Swamp Gravy, community performance is a shift away from the elitism of Broadway to “a large-scale, oral history-based play of, by, and for the community” (104). Swamp Gravy began out of a community’s need to tell its own story and out of Dr. Geer’s desire to test his community performance ideas, but the cook for Colquitt’s Swamp Gravy is contemporary southern author, Jo Carson. She creates the scripts, which are a key part of the phenomenon, Swamp Gravy.

Her writing for the Colquitt project helped make Swamp Gravy what it is, an ongoing hit which attracts audiences from all over the United States and which sells out (300 seats) for its two seasons, month-long weekend runs in the fall and spring, totaling twenty-four performances each year. In writing for Colquitt, Carson transforms the oral utterances of a culture into scripts for community performance. As the original swamp gravy does, her Swamp Gravy starts with a base to which other ingredients are added. True to the lyrics of Kimbrel’s song, Carson’s recipe for the community play is “taking what you have and making something unique.” Building on her pre-existing literary base, Carson combines a cupful of oral history, a helping of the folk life play, a sprinkle of southern drama, and a dash of liberal feminism before she stirs in a tablespoon of store-bought community performance theory to create her scripts for Swamp Gravy. This dissertation examines the Swamp Gravy plays as crafted by Carson and discusses the importance of each of these individual components found in her community plays.

While the dish, swamp gravy, has as its beginnings fish drippings in grease, Carson’s community play also has a base in her earlier writing. Carson had an established literary career before she began writing for Swamp Gravy. Her previous work as a poet, an award-winning children’s book author, a short story writer, and traditional playwright are the starting point for the community play. Chapter One of the dissertation looks at her writing prior to Swamp Gravy to establish the foundation upon which she builds the community play.

Carson’s first published work is a collection of monologues and dialogues, stories i ain’t told nobody yet, which is the model for many of her scenes in Swamp Gravy. These
poems rely heavily on the resonance of everyday speech to carry the rhythm. Also each features either humor or irony, Carson’s favorite vehicles to express deep notions. The structures of these pieces, monologues and dialogues, become the recurring technique she uses in the Swamp Gravy plays, with most scenes featuring one speaker or two at the most. A close examination of this volume reveals its influence on her career as a playwright. In fact, Carson’s community play series begins with *stories i ain’t told nobody yet*.

To date, Carson has also published three popular children’s books. Earlier books, *Pulling My Leg* and *You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You*, show Carson’s fascination with orality while *The Great Shaking* reveals her interest in oral history. The first two also employ young narrators who explore those very human firsts: pulling that first tooth and experiencing death for the first time. In simple, fresh ways, Carson observes and ponders these monumental occasions through the words of a young girl. This frank, no-frills approach to life experiences presented first in these children’s books becomes characteristic of her Swamp Gravy plays. Unlike the other two stories which focus on very personal narratives and very specific characters, *The Great Shaking* is about recorded history, an earthquake of the 1830s, but it does so from a most unexpected viewpoint. Animals describe the catastrophic event and give their reactions to it. Humans are only mentioned in passing, casually dismissed by the bear and other animals. This tale illustrates Carson’s search for novel storytellers, and the dry humor of the bear surfaces as one of her trademarks. These children’s books, which pre-date her community performance work, demonstrate Carson’s literary experiments with voice, which are later perfected in the Swamp Gravy plays.

Carson wrote short stories, too, before turning to community performance work. *The Last of the ‘Waltz across Texas’ and Other Stories*, published in 1993, is a collection of her stories. Several of these works first appeared separately in such publications as *The Chattahoochee Review* and *Appalachian Journal*; a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts supported the publication of the short story collection. The book begins with “Assumptions,” a story about a one-legged man and his dog, no ordinary dog, though; this one can talk. From that rollicking road story about two unusual hitchhikers, the literary journey winds through southern terrain. The topics vary from rocky love
relationships to back woods religious fanaticism, from a rattlesnake named “the Governor” disrupting a coal miners’ strike to a body being snatched out of a Kentucky funeral parlor and taken for a mountain ride. Also the characters which people Carson’s stories are frequently just as bizarre as the talking dog and just as believable. It is in these short stories that she exercises her ability to tell a good yarn and to develop characters the reader cares about. Her storytelling and characterization in *The Last of ‘Waltz across Texas* and Other Stories under gird the scripts in her community plays.

Carson’s first plays, *Daytrips* (premiered in 1989, published in 1991) and *A Preacher with a Horse to Ride* (published in 1994 but written much earlier), also contribute to her development as a writer. *Daytrips* is largely autobiographical and looks at the complicated relationship of three generations of females, grandmother, mother, and daughter, further confounded by the fact that the mother has Alzheimer’s disease. *Daytrips* with its character doubling is more experimental in its staging than her community plays are, but the feminist elements apparent in this early work grow stronger with each subsequent play written for Swamp Gravy. While oral history is an integral part of the community play, *A Preacher with a Horse to Ride* is Carson’s first attempt to create drama out of history. A trial and a coal miners’ strike become the subject as she intersperses her fictional characters with such well known figures of the day as Theodore Dreiser. Carson continues to pursue the question of what constitutes history; and with the creation of her community play, she opts for oral history and storytelling. The rather straight-forward look at history found in *A Preacher with a Horse to Ride* softens or blurs in her Swamp Gravy plays.

These earlier works differ in form and structure but have similarities in theme, the use of storytelling, and Carson’s characteristic humor. Carson’s poems, children’s books, short stories, and plays are the literary base for her community performance pieces. Consequently, Chapter One analyzes these works to identify the elements in them which contribute to Swamp Gravy’s community play.

In the dish, swamp gravy, the potatoes are first to be added to the base of fish drippings. They are also the main ingredient in terms of bulk; the other items are simply there to flavor up those ordinary, bland tasting chunks of potatoes. To Carson’s base of previously written material, she spoons in a cupful of oral history. Chapter Two focuses
on the importance of oral history to Carson’s work. With the Swamp Gravy plays, the
stories from the people of Colquitt are the starting point for the scripts. Carson’s work
relies heavily on the art of storytelling and oral history, not history understood as the
recording of fact. “Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story,” writes Trinh Minh-ha
in her text, Woman, Native, Other (120). As she sets up a binary opposition between
history and storytelling, Minh-ha places history in the male domain with “fact” while she
designates storytelling as female and equates it with “tale, legend, myth, fiction,
literature” (120). “Story, history, literature (or religion, philosophy, natural science,
ethics) – all in one...When history separated itself from story, it started indulging in
accumulation and facts,” she explains (119). As early as 1918, Virginia Woolf also
questions the term, “historical.” “Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?”
she queries. No, responds Minh-ha in 1989, and around the same time, Jo Carson echoes
this stance. “Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story,” she jokes. In her
Swamp Gravy plays, she dismisses the textbook version of history in favor of stories
passed on from generation to generation.

Minh-ha says it is the women of the culture who are the honored storytellers, and
in Carson’s texts it is the women who also reveal the stories. According to Minh-ha,
storytelling is the common link between women in every culture as “every gesture, every
word involves our past, present, and future” (122). Linda Tate, author of A Southern
Weave of Women: Fiction of the Contemporary South, refers to this connection between
storytelling and women as “talking a new talk” to “validate the old” (208). “Many voices
are mingled in my mouth: those of southern women writers and of their characters; those
of my mother and grandmothers; and finally my own. The matrix and the voice, the
womb and the loom, become one, and in weaving the tales of my many southern women,
I come to know and to say my own,” she explains (208). For Carson and all the women
involved in the Swamp Gravy project, storytelling is just as vital. With three times as
many women as men in the stage productions and with almost all of the storygathering
being done by women, Swamp Gravy gives voice to the females of its south Georgia
culture.

A great storyteller herself, Carson honors the stories and the voices of Colquitt’s
women through her scripts. In the Swamp Gravy project, the gathering of oral history is
an ongoing process; interviews are taped, then later transcribed and archived. Using the transcriptions and often times the tapes themselves to listen to the resonance, timber, and cadence of the storytellers, Carson begins the process of creating a script. It is the oral history dimension of Swamp Gravy which provides the stories, and it is the stories collected which drive Carson’s community plays. The writer does adapt oral history for the stage; she does retell other people’s stories, but that is not all she does. If her scripts were just oral history adaptations, her work would be easier to discuss. The community play is not just one thing. Carson’s does not merely adapt; she has to write, too.

In swamp gravy, as the onions stew, their flavor infiltrates the potatoes, seeping in to make those potatoes tastier. Similarly, in her Swamp Gravy community plays, Carson throws a heaping helping of folk life into the pot. Chapter Two looks at the scholarly attempts to define that term and to situate Swamp Gravy in the folk life play domain. The organizers and performers of Swamp Gravy take great pride in its having been designated the “Official Folk Life Play of Georgia.” Members of the Georgia General Assembly voted to give Colquitt’s community performance project this distinction. Of course, like the project, Swamp Gravy, which is not easily pigeon-holed, neither is the term, “folk life play.” What exactly is a folk life play? Is it the same as a folk play? Is synonymous with folk drama?

Some scholars maintain a folk play, in the purest sense, is a sort of ritual performed by the peasantry, acting out a fixed performance, requiring little or no script, for an audience totally familiar with the story. Many trace the origin of this genre all the way back to the Greeks while others say it starts during the Middle Ages with morality plays in general and the mummers’ play in specific. In America, however, the term does not surface until 1919, with Frederick Koch and his Carolina Playmakers. Koch credits the group with the creation of the phrase, “folk play,” since it appeared for the first time on the playbill of the Carolina Playmakers’ premier performance at Chapel Hill in March, 1919. He distinguishes the folk play by subject but modifies the definition to allow for a specific author who writes a fixed text.

These original American folk plays, which were academic exercises composed and performed by students in Koch’s playwriting courses at the University of North Carolina, come close to Jo Carson’s “folk life play.” An analysis of the folk plays associated with
Koch and his students show some similarities to Carson’s work but also a major difference. Like Koch’s plays, the Swamp Gravy plays do rely on folk stories as their textual base. However, unlike the Carolina Playmakers’ productions, Carson’s community plays include multiple stories in each play rather than present a single folk tale told in a one-act play. Also Swamp Gravy plays are written by a professional, not college students, and are performed by members of the community from which the stories originated, not by a drama school cast.

Other authorities might argue Carson’s community play is not a folk play at all; that it is an example of folk drama. As folklore became an established academic discipline, the effort began to define folk play and folk drama. In an essay printed in 1972 in *Folklore and Folklife*, Roger D. Abrahams compares folk drama to festival. Later Thomas A. Green says, “The folk play shares important qualities with other forms of folklore,” and then refers to folk drama as more restrictive. “Folk drama is a scripted performance which incorporates mimesis and role-distribution among two or more players and which adheres to the traditional aesthetic and communicative models of the performing community” (“Introduction”). In her 1980 essay, “Model and Text in Folk Drama,” Anne C. Burson provides a more concise summary of the naming dilemma and says her “aim is to examine our current definitions of folk drama and to suggest a new way of conceptualizing the genre” (305). Using mumming plays and medical skits for comparison, she calls for a “model-oriented conception of folk drama” (315). A more recent book, *Rethinking Folk Drama* by Steve Tillis, clarifies the debate. He provides an in-depth analysis of folk play versus folk drama, but he does not use the term “folk-life play.”

So what did the Georgia General Assembly have in mind when it named Swamp Gravy a “folk-life play”? The folk play/folk drama/folk life play dialogue by scholars is in direct relation to Carson’s writing of the community play, yet another term to delineate. Chapter Three of my dissertation tracks the origins of the folk play in America and its differentiation from folk drama in order to discern the folk life elements in the Swamp Gravy plays. Also these elements in her plays are examined to determine how they play an important role in the success of Swamp Gravy.

In the dish swamp gravy, tomatoes come next. Just as they simmer with the
already cooked potatoes and onions to produce an entirely new flavor, Carson adds a sprinkle of southern drama to oral history and folk life in order to create her plays. Chapter Four of the dissertation discusses the relationship of southern drama to Carson’s community performance work. Like the ubiquitous folk play, southern drama lacks a consistent literary profile. Here southern drama is defined generally as a representation of southern culture, using T.S. Eliot’s definition of “culture” in “Notes towards the definition of Culture.” He says “culture” is “all the characteristic activities and interests of a people” (Watson 1). In The History of Southern Drama, Charles Watson defines southern drama by the geographic boundaries of the Confederacy and by a list of literary traits. Watson points to “the presence of one or more distinctive social types,” an emphasis on violence and fundamentalist religion, a “dependence of southern legendry,” “a highly recognizable form of speech,” and “a spirited injection of late local color” (2-5). In terms of Watson’s geographic origin and subject matter, Carson is indeed a southern dramatist. Her earlier plays, Daytrips and A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, are categorized as southern drama, and the later Swamp Gravy plays certainly contain the characteristics Watson outlines.

However, Watson’s seventh point, the twentieth century tendency to “often evince a hate attitude toward the South” and to employ a revisionist viewpoint, like Tennessee Williams does, for instance, is not present in Carson’s brand of southern drama (5). Rather than denigrate, the purpose of Swamp Gravy as a community performance project and of Carson as a writer is to present an unflinching, yet embracing look at the southern community through the telling of its stories. Southerners “try to spin a sense of reality out of language,” Linda Tate says, and Carson does just that. She chooses stories which reflect both the good and bad as it exists in Colquitt.

While the Swamp Gravy community plays are about the South and hence southern in locale and theme, they do not truly fit the traditional Aristotelian definition of drama because of their unusual dramatic form. Rather than follow a single story line from beginning to middle to end, Carson’s community plays feature a spine, one individual’s story, as it is interwoven with other stories. Structurally the Swamp Gravy plays differ from some other southern playwrights such as Williams, Lillian Hellman, Beth Henley, but her theme and characterization in Swamp Gravy are pure southern drama. Chapter
Four offers Carson’s work as an example of contemporary southern drama dependent on oral history and the folk tradition.

Like swamp gravy’s secret ingredient, my uncle’s pepper sauce doused on for robust flavor, Carson gives Swamp Gravy the perfect punch, too. To oral history, the folk life play, and southern drama, she adds a dash of feminist theater. Carson’s writing is representative of liberal feminism, defined by Jill Dolan in Presence and Desire as that kind of feminism which “developed strategies for influencing existing social and political systems around women’s issues,” and radical feminism (15). Her plays for Swamp Gravy are the unlikely vehicle for feminism. In addition to being celebrations of a communal past, these plays are also stages for Anglo-American feminism as defined by Alice Jardine. “Sex of the author, narrative destinies, images of women, and gender stereotypes” are what Jardine calls the “touchstones of feminist literary criticism in the United States,” and Carson addresses each of these feminist issues through her scripts for the community plays in Colquitt, Georgia (54).

Although this town is in the United States, it is still small enough and economically deprived enough to be grouped with Trinh Minh-ha’s Third World countries. A village by American standards, this rural community has a county population of approximately 6,000 and a city census of about 2,000 with an economy totally dependent on agriculture. The local chamber of commerce director optimistically places the average per capita income at $16,923 compared to the state of Georgia’s $20,198 and the United States’ average of $21,699. The statistics, however, presented in The Georgia County Guide, a publication of the University of Georgia, are bleaker. Using the national average poverty threshold for a family of four persons as $12,674, in 1989, 45.8 percent of Miller County’s black population and 41.2 percent of households headed by females fell below the poverty level (49). From an economic standpoint, Colquitt, Georgia, was the Third World of the United States. Also this area was virtually untouched by the feminist agenda in 1989. Women still rushed home to “fix supper” before coming to play practice or attending meetings. They combined household and parenting duties with traditional women’s jobs (careers other than teaching school or nursing are practically nonexistent in this community). Men rode around in pickup trucks, chewed tobacco, watched football, and still expected to be waited on by their wives. In summary, the
patriarchal structure was alive and well in South Georgia as Swamp Gravy got its start.

The project was the brainchild of a local visionary female, Joy Jinks, and an out-of-town acquaintance of hers, Richard Geer. Between the two of them and her dream of a town play and his theory of community performance, the basic premise of Swamp Gravy was formed to which Carson brings a feminist dimension. Chapter Five examines her careful shaping of the material which not only gives Swamp Gravy its community appeal but also its feminism. It is her perspective that allows the Swamp Gravy plays to focus on the female rather than the male. All six of her plays contain a feminist approach; it is another aspect, along with the folk life play, oral history, and southern drama, which seems to contribute to Carson’s community play.

While most of the ingredients in swamp gravy are natural, the dish contains one “store-bought” item. Catsup is dumped in with the potatoes, onions, and tomatoes to reach the desired color, consistency, and flavor. In the Swamp Gravy community performance project, it is the performance theories of Dr. Richard Owen Geer, which could be considered “store-bought.” He is not a native of Colquitt, and he is a paid professional. While working on his doctorate in performance studies at Northwestern University, Geer came to Colquitt for the first time to discuss the possibility of a play about the community. His ideas about theater and the implementation of those ideas through Carson’s community play are the subject of Chapter Six. In Colquitt, he wanted to experiment with theater “of the people, by the people, for the people” (“Of the People 28). “Of the people” meant the subject of the plays would come from those in the community. “By the people” meant that, with the exception of a few imported professionals, all of the work from the organization to performance would be done by members of the community, most of whom would be volunteers, not employees. “For the people” meant that the intended audience was the community itself.

His objectives with Swamp Gravy were three-fold. The project should have impact on individuals, on the community, and on the economy. As a director, Geer sees Swamp Gravy as a form of empowerment for all involved in the project. From storygatherers to the stage crew to the performers, all are honored for their contributions and enriched by the experience. For the community, Swamp Gravy has become a catalyst for change. A town of 2,000 with nothing special about it acquired a sense of great pride in its heritage.
Swamp Gravy also reaches well beyond its original local audience. It now attracts thousands of visitors to Colquitt each performance season, giving the project a definite economic impact. As folks come to town to see the play, they have to eat, sleep, and buy gas, incidentals, and souvenirs. These tourist dollars spent in the town are a boost to the agriculturally-based community, where this source of revenue was totally unexpected. Also the revenue from ticket sales enables the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council to produce future Swamp Gravy performances, to maintain and improve the performance space, to employ a staff, and also to fund other projects of the organization.

To drive the community performance project, Geer relies on oral history gathering as the source for scripts. As local people interview other local people, both the storygatherer and the storyteller benefit from the encounter. Then the tapes are copied, transcribed, and archived, processes which involve other participants. Many interviewees are also videotaped, providing a storehouse of visual images, with other volunteers doing the camera work. Swamp Gravy retains a copy of everything, and all materials are made available to the local library for research. Finally the oral history is collected in book form with four volumes of Swamp Gravy stories already in print. The gathering and compiling of local oral history involve many other members of the community, further instill community pride, and raise money for Swamp Gravy and the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council’s other projects.

However, all of these archiving activities are by-products. Geer’s main intent was to produce a play which not only reflected the community but which was also aesthetically sound. To accomplish this, he needed a professional playwright, and his choice was Jo Carson. She was recruited by him and hired by the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council to write the first Swamp Gravy oral-history-based community performance piece, Swamp Gravy Sketches. It was a success. During her six-year association with Swamp Gravy, Carson wrote five other plays seen on stage: The Blue Doctor, The Gospel Truth, Special Edition, The Rock and the Hard Place, and Good Medicine, along with rewrites of these original texts when the plays were remounted. Her final work for Swamp Gravy, Lost and Found, was never performed. She refers to herself as a “house-broke” playwright when she talks about her community performance writing. It takes talent and diplomacy; the scripts have to pass not only her approval but committee
approval as well. Therefore, both Geer and Carson have had opportunities to watch their work evolve. Their community performance ideas and practices make Swamp Gravy that unusual theater which produces “professional amateurs” who follow a professional script based on their community stories. The professional aspect of the project makes Swamp Gravy an artistic achievement, but it is the volunteer cast which makes it true community performance.

The dish, swamp gravy, is always a welcome accompaniment to fish suppers, and like its namesake, Swamp Gravy has become popular. Audiences seem to delight in Carson’s concoction, and some other communities want to imitate it. The conclusion discusses attempts to launch similar projects in other communities and looks at the continuation of Swamp Gravy in Colquitt after Jo Carson ceased to write for the project. The oral history based community performance project is now a model for several others around the United States. Carson alone has authored over thirty community plays in such places as Chicago, Illinois; Newport News, Virginia; Denver, Colorado; and Belle Glade and Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. Brief descriptions and discussions of these projects are included in the conclusion.

Every Swamp Gravy play begins and ends with Karen Kimbrel’s “Storytelling Song.” The lyrics are about each of us telling our story: “You tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine. And we’ll put ’em all together, and spice it all up, and we’ll have a storytelling time.” These words explain Jo Carson’s simple, yet revolutionary recipe for writing the community performance plays. While she is giving communities the opportunity to tell their stories on stage, she takes existing strains in drama, puts them all together to suit her purpose, and then spices them all up with her own storytelling technique to come out with a delectable performance piece. The ingredients may be ordinary; however, the new concoction can be extraordinary, and Carson’s recipe for the community play perfected through her Swamp Gravy scripts is one worth repeating. It is a form of drama that works toward theater of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Colquitt, Georgia, was the first community, where Carson cooked up Swamp Gravy and her original recipe for the community play. The result is so tantalizing audiences keep coming back year after year to this small, southern, rural town to enjoy her concoction. In all of her community play writing, Carson’s basic recipe always calls
for a careful blending of folk life, oral history, and community performance; then she usually adds the optional ingredients, southern drama and feminism, that reflect her own perspective as a writer. It is now a proven recipe, and she is not stingy with it. In addition to traveling around the United States to write plays herself for communities, she has mentored beginning playwrights to do likewise. She has contributed to an art form which can empower individual participants as well as reach a wide audience, one which unites amateurs and professionals. Carson’s work can also impact whole communities of people, not just performers and their audiences; it can capture the true flavor of a community and serve it up to an audience. Like any good recipe, Carson’s community play recipe should be handed down from generation to generation and can be shared with anyone willing to taste it. This dissertation seeks to analyze and understand the literary contribution of Jo Carson to the Swamp Gravy project as it has been created in Colquitt, Georgia, and as it can be savored in any community.
CHAPTER ONE
A BASE OF CARSON’S EARLIER WORKS

When cooks set out to create a new dish, they begin with their former knowledge and experience in the kitchen; similarly Jo Carson relies on her previous writing expertise as a starting point for her Swamp Gravy scripts. From a base of existing work, she is able to adapt, expand, and experiment in order to write community plays. The author of poems, short stories, children’s books, and plays, Carson transfers the storytelling, wit, and southernisms evident in her writing in these diverse genres to her scripts for Swamp Gravy. Her earlier pieces reveal her preference for oral history and an insistence on folklife details, both of which become characteristic of her Swamp Gravy plays. Furthermore, Carson’s prior experimentation in southern drama and feminist theater helps shape the structure and content of her plays for the community of Colquitt.

Her personal background offers insight into the path of her writing career. She is a native of Johnson City, Tennessee, born in 1946. Carson attended the alma mater of her parents, graduating from East Tennessee State University with a B.S. degree in both speech and theater and has taken post-graduate courses in geography, also at ESTU. However, before earning those degrees in 1973, Carson relocated to New York City, intent on becoming a writer. As Amanda McCullough says, “She did not find her dream there and instead returned to her native Tennessee” (1). She never left it again. As a recipient of the 2002 Award of Honor at ETSU, Carson explains that “her success has happened because she’s stayed true to her roots” (www.etsu.edu/alumni/award/02award_carson.asp). Her first professional writing was for a television station as a producer of local history videos. She later became a part of the Road Company, traveling, writing, and performing with this theater group as it created pieces “relevant to the Appalachian lifestyle” (McCullough 1).

“All my work fits in my mouth. I write performance material no matter what else the pieces get called, and whether they are for my voice or other characters’ voices, like the plays, they are first to be spoken aloud,” she explains (“Personal Interview,” April 30, 2006). Her first published work, stories i ain’t told nobody yet (hereafter designated as stories), was released in 1989, and initiates the Carson voice, that insistent southern sound of hers. It made the Editor’s Choice on Booklist and the American Library
Association’s recommended list. Some of these pieces also ran on National Public
Radio’s “All Things Considered” as commentaries. The volume of poetry, a series of
monologues and dialogues, reads like a conversation with the people of the Tennessee.
The five sections headed “Neighbors and Kin,” “Observations,” “Relationships,”
“Work,” and “We Say of Ourselves” contain unnamed, numbered poems that are grouped
thematically and reflect the lives of southern mountain folks. Told through polyphony of
distinct voices, the poetic portraits are all believable, and they should be because Carson
says they have real life origins. “These pieces all come from people. I never sat at my
desk and made them up. I heard the heart of each of them somewhere. A grocery store
line. A beauty shop. The emergency room. A neighbor across the clothesline to another
neighbor,” explains Carson in the preface to stories (xi). The poet’s orality in the
selections is purposeful: “My intent has been to remain true to the speaker’s thoughts and
rhythms of speech and anything else that can be kept somehow in chosen words” (stories
xi) She has “spun fine cloth from the rough muslin of local speech” is the way Dan
Hulbert of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution describes Carson’s use of dialect in stories
(3).

She also laces the language with irony. The opening selection, “Prologue,” Carson
sets the ironic tone for the rest of the vignettes found in the collection. The speaker in the
poem talks about Willis Comfort as a man who delighted in enmity: “Willis Comfort did
not outlive/as many enemies as he hoped to,” but he is also becomes representative of
humanity as the last stanza suggests: “What can be said of Willis/can be said of
everybody: he made it through this world/ the best way he knew how” (stories 3).
“Prologue” prepares the reader for what is to come, a volume of poetry with a variety of
narrative voices, all of which are speaking in the vernacular of the Tennessee hills,
usually with an edge of irony. Through them, Carson tells the stories of average people
and contemplates the human experience.

Carson’s subjects run the gamut, but all receive the same sparse treatment. The
section, “Neighbors and Kin,” contains fourteen poems devoted to these kinds of
connections in a community. The first is about a neighbor who “could look the devil in
the eye and say no thanks he didn’t want to go to hell, while at the same time tryin’ to
slip Jesus Christ a couple of dollars for the free gift of salvation” (stories 5). Those lines
epitomize this man who the exasperated narrator says is incapable of accepting a gift. “The man don’t understand he’s doin’ a favor when he takes and eats them damn zucchini, and when he pays me for ‘em, when he pays me for ‘em, it’s me ends up beholden to him” (stories 6). Using humor and personality as the vehicles in this poem, Carson takes a new look at an old adage, “It’s better to give than receive.”

Other poems in this section that focus on neighbors specifically are monologues like the one that starts out with the lines, “A lady who lives there close to me called me up the other – she’d had new carpet laid and wanted me to come and drink a cup of coffee and admire” (stories 19). The narrator goes on and on about the “bleach white” carpet in her neighbor’s living room while the speaker in another poem complains about Henry’s coffee that “gets boiled till it grows little devils in it” and Henry’s cornbread that is so bad “the dogs wouldn’t eat it” before assuring the reader, “But it ain’t gonna be me that says he can’t cook” (stories 14). An ailing George is a recurring character in three other poems, and the seemingly random comments about him are a loose connective device between these separate pieces and between the diverse narrators (stories 9, 21, 23). The gossipy critiques in all of these poems typify neighborly rapport and give insight into the mundane details of everyday life.

When Carson turns to relatives in this section, the pieces lapse into recollections of “sittin’ on what we called splinter benches ‘cause we were too poor for store-bought furniture,” “a story about my daddy’s daddy who bought a horse, a long-legged red mare come from kin at Nashville who owed a favor,” a mother cooking a week’s worth of meals on Saturday for “her bachelor brother,” and “brother Estes and his cousin Ray,” who “left here for California the minute the two of them together had enough money to buy a car” (stories 7, 10, 11,17). These monologues, introduced in “Neighbors and Kin” to characterize Tennessee folks and examine relationships, later become the staple of Carson’s Swamp Gravy scenes, where a solitary cast member shares a story about herself or himself or about a friend or neighbor. Like the poems in stories, each Swamp Gravy monologue also has an ordinary person as the narrator and the same Carson pensiveness or contemplation about life.

Dialogues are not as numerous as the monologues in “Neighbors and Kin” or in Swamp Gravy, but Carson sometimes uses them to create a different dynamic and to
illustrate the human tendency to argue and the frequent failure to communicate. One poetic dialogue, another reference to George, begins, “You know the other day we went over at George’s get some eggs?” only to have the second speaker contradict, “No, we went over George’s get some beans. George ain’t got eggs” to which the first speaker counters, “No, we got beans up at Lucille’s” (stories 21). The back-and-forth rhythm of this piece continues throughout this poem and others in stories. It also becomes very useful in Carson’s Swamp Gravy writing.

These opposing voices are a forerunner of the call-and-response technique Carson uses in Swamp Gravy’s Good Medicine. In that community play, she contrasts folk remedies to modern medicine through a question-and-answer format. One cast member asks how to cure some ailment; then another cast member offers a treatment. The doctor sometimes responds, offering a commentary on the suggestion and its effectiveness. Such argumentative dialogues by Carson provide a change of pace from the monologues in stories and from the more frequent monologues and occasional multiple-cast scenes in Good Medicine. Carson models other Swamp Gravy scenes after stories. The playwright opens Special Edition with a series of “I come froms” as several cast members distinguish themselves by the food they bring to family reunions and dinners on the ground at church. Also in the same play, Carson employs two women’s voices to tell one story of domestic violence, giving the audience the sense that it is both women’s stories, and by extension the experience of many women.

Like stories where the poems about individuals have a way of looking at community and at mountain culture specifically, Carson’s community plays do the same. A monologue in a Swamp Gravy play may tell of one particular individual, but it is woven with other stories to create a play that has an overall sense of community revealed through distinct individual voices. In illustration, The Gospel Truth, includes “Honor,” a scene very much like the poems in “Relationships” and “We say of Ourselves’ in which a woman talks of bad marriages and her irresponsible mother. The speaker mentions how another woman who married her ex-husband jumped in a pond to drown herself but got caught on a limb; she says had she been in the same situation, “I wouldn’t a caught no limb” and further endorses the single life by admitting, “I pray to the Lord to let me stay by myself now” (The Gospel Truth 15). “Honor” is one woman’s story; however, her
experiences as an unhappy wife and reluctant care giver mirror the misfortune of others. Through monologues like “Honor,” dialogues like “Brown Dress,” and multiple voices like “I Come Froms” in the Swamp Gravy plays, Carson identifies the culture of a specific place, Colquitt, as she creates narrators with individual personalities similar to those found in stories.

From the people portraits found in “Neighbors and Kin,” the poet turns to broader social issues in the section, “Observations.” In these poems Carson addresses such problems as insulting stereotypes, environmental destruction, and entrenched prejudice. The first selection, #16, starts by acknowledging the negative image of mountain people who supposedly “can’t read,/can’t write,/don’t wear shoes,” and ends with the strong declaration of a native Tennessean, who says, “I am from here,/I’m not like that/and I am damned tired of being told I am (stories 29-30).

Carson follows this challenge to the moronic mountain man stereotype, with four poems about the cost of progress to the Tennessee hills. “There are some things I want to know about, I want to know what happened to the trees” begins the next monologue which mourns the loss of two-hundred-year-old trees to the bull dozer for housing developments and shopping areas (stories 31) while #18, which starts with “You can always tell a tourist town,” pinpoints the changes in mountain culture once tourism arrives (stories 33). The shortest and most political poem in this section is an attack on roads and the growth they bring; the speaker is going to write Washington to say, “We don’t need no more roads” because “More big ones is gonna get more people, more little ones is gonna get more people, and we don’t need no more people” (stories 35). In “It’s Changing Here,” a young narrator uses short, dagger-like phrases and repetition of the word, "new,” – “a new road, a new house, a new business, a new something-or-another” – to emphasize the senseless destruction of the mountains and their natural beauty for the sake of civilization. The staccato redundancy of the speaker’s words hammers the point home much like a carpenter nailing up a new wall.

After the passion and anger expressed in these pieces about the environment, Carson abruptly switches topics in the next poem and talks about racial bigotry, past and present, in an unemotional way. The speaker remembers, “The first time I sat in a restaurant where blacks were not served Martin Luther King was still alive,” and ends
with the bleak admission of continued prejudice that spans twenty years (stories 38).

“The only thing that changed is the law,” observes the narrator (stories 39). The final poem in this section deals with a different kind of discrimination, the way locals react to newcomers. “I want to know when you get to be from a place, five years, ten, twenty?” is the plaintive query of someone who has lived there for eight years already and wonders if he/she will ever be accepted as a part of the mountain community (stories 40). This non-native answers the question, “But honey, where are you from?” with the alienating words, “I am from three states and six different cities…. I am from that suspicious minority that doesn’t have roots like trees” (stories 40). By juxtaposing the unchanged prejudicial attitudes of some people to the changing look of the land, Carson presents her native Tennessee as a place of complex issues. Her aim is not sentimentality but reality.

As she does in these poems, Carson often tackles tough social issues when she writes for Swamp Gravy. For instance, in Good Medicine, it is child abuse, and in The Gospel Truth, molestation and racism. When she addresses these subjects in the plays, she uses multiple perspectives similar to those in her poems and a questioning approach. However, she is not as didactic in the Swamp Gravy plays and is more open-ended than she is in the poems, where the narrators always state their opinions on the subject at hand. As a playwright, Carson offers up a story for the consideration and contemplation of the audience and leaves it up to the listeners to draw their own conclusions.

While the narrative voices in “Observations” long for equality and identity, those found in the seven poems of the next section, “Relationships,” take a critical look at marriage. With the exception of #26, which is a couple’s humorous dialogue about their forty-year courtship, all are negative accounts of matrimony. In fact, the first poem ends with the assertion, “If you’re askin’ me a girl ain’t never old enough to marry” (stories 43). The opening lines of other poems express a range of experiences in marriage from mild dissatisfaction to total failure: “I had a beautiful wife – compared to what he’s got.” “You know, all along I’ve been back here playing second fiddle.” “I threw my mother-in-law out.” “My daughter got divorced and she and her little boy has moved back in with me. For the time being” (stories 44-50). These poems certainly verbalize reservations about matrimony, but Carson saves the most extreme case of a bad marriage for last. “I cannot remember all the times he hit me,” the victim of domestic violence confides; “I
can name what of me he broke: my nose, my arm, and four ribs in the course of six years’ marriage” (stories 52). The narrator ends her monologue with advice to other women: “Do not say you fell down stairs no matter how much he swears he loves you. He does love you, he loves you hurt and he will hit you again” (stories 52). In Special Edition for Swamp Gravy, Carson takes another look at domestic violence. In the play she moves from just advising women against continuing to live in abusive relationships to focusing on the story of one woman who fought back. In the scene, “Brown Dress,” the speaker recounts years of being beaten and having to watch her daughter receive the same treatment before she takes action. She answers spousal and child abuse with a gun, killing her husband before he can harm her daughter again. The social issues driving the poet in “Relationships” receive further attention in her Swamp Gravy plays, where her original stance against domestic violence is even stronger.

In the section entitled “Work,” the poet shifts from the hard work of marriage to the hard work of earning a living in Tennessee. She starts with a tribute to the “only junkyard in this county” before moving to an uneducated woman’s monologue about her life of poverty where her choices involve “pinto beans or navy beans at the grocery store” for her “four young’uns” and “rats or roaches where I live” (stories 55-56). Next a farmer admits “there’s easier ways of breakin’ your back than scratchin’ in dirt” (stories 32). Then a researcher bemoans “the beginning to the end of life in some small creek, not to mention some small planet,” and a seventy-four-year-old former plant worker who quit the dye section says of those who stayed, “a lot of ‘em was younger than me but of them that stayed there ain’t one alive today to tell about it” (stories 59-61).

Other accounts of hazardous employment in stories include the possibility of lost fingers in a sheet metal job, a terminated press operator, and a secretary at a uranium power plant that “would make the nylon hose melt off your legs.” The two somewhat positive poems about work are #36, in which the narrator takes pride in having “lived in harmony and good union with my friends and neighbors… and kept a piece of earth in working order” and the owner of a direct mail business whose incentives to keep working are the names of his former bosses (stories 65, 69).

In Swamp Gravy’s Sketches, her first community play, Carson once again looks at the theme of work. She devotes most scenes to showing and explaining particular farm
tasks in south Georgia like harvesting peanuts and picking cotton, different from the labor of Tennessee mill workers but physically exhausting nonetheless and compounded by the heat. Like the poet, the playwright also manages to indicate labor injustices. She includes details of the harsh conditions, long hours, and low wages associated with this farm work. Whether she is writing poems or plays or writing about her native Tennessee or south Georgia, Carson does not ignore the plight of working class people.

The last section of stories, “We Say of Ourselves,” returns to interpersonal relationships introduced in the first section of poems, but this last batch of fifteen poems produces the most distinct voices. For example, one of her monologues is reminiscent of Willis Comfort in the “Prologue,” only meaner. It begins, “My brother died sitting at the dinner table. I know he had to be surprised. I know he hadn’t planned for mortality right then” (stories 87). The narrator then launches into an account of her ne’er-do-well brother married multiple times. She reports, “The only folks who come to the buryin’ were all the ex-wives’ lawyers” (stories 87). Carson nails the narrator and her sibling with just a few words of southern dialect.

Several other poems highlight mother-daughter conversations. Number 41 serves as a warning: “The day I married, my mother had one piece of wedding advice: ‘Don’t make good potato salad,’ she told me, ‘it’s hard to make and you’ll have to take something every time you get invited somewhere. Just cook up beans; people eat them too” (stories 72). Using the example of food, Carson provides advice for the daughter to live by: “What my mother might and could have said is: Choose carefully what you get good at ‘cause you’ll spend the rest of your life doing it” (stories 72). In #47, it is a son who wants to get away from his mother’s control. “Aw, lemme tell you, this bachelor stuff, it’s great. Out from under Mama,” he assures the reader, adding, “Ass-patched blue jeans ain’t gonna be my style no more” (stories 82).

With unflinching accuracy, Carson’s characters speak in the tongue of poor white trash or nonstandard English and use this talk to evoke specific images. In fact, Robert J. Higgs says, “Jo Carson comes up with so many such lines that I suggest calling them ‘Carsons’ in her honor” (9). One example of a “Carson” is from the last section of stories in which she writes about the difficulty of traveling on convoluted, treacherous mountain roads. “Honey, you drive two weeks to yesterday out 58,” instructs the speaker, and the
“two weeks to yesterday” becomes Carson’s way of expressing a very time-consuming drive in four short words (stories 86). The colloquial conclusion to the monologue, “Step on it and we’ll wait dinner for you,” lets the reader know the last stretch of road is at least straight enough to finally risk a little speed (stories 86). In an earlier poem Carson defines terms in her own way, making a distinction between being “broke” and “poor mouthing.” “Broke is not sissy-footing around,” the narrator explains (stories 76). These few examples illustrate the “Carsons” that the poet/playwright infuses into all of her works to capture the speech habits of a community.

She is also true to the sound of the language with the omission of word endings in stories. The pronunciations, “choosin’, talkin’, scratchin’,” are characteristic of southern speech as are her word choices such as “the buryin’” instead of the funeral and referring to another person as “still a-livin’” (stories 87). The “see, it don’t matter to nothin’” type of nonstandard English that she reproduces is indigenous to the rural South, and rather than condemn this usage, Carson capitalizes on it in her writing. Her re-creation of southern speech, which marks stories and all of her earlier works, becomes vital to the success of her community plays, where she must be able to tell stories in words representative of the Colquitt community, in lines sometimes lifted directly from the oral histories of its citizens.

Carson’s use southern dialect that is characteristic of her poems and Swamp Gravy plays can also be found in her first children’s book, Pulling My Leg, published in 1990. It tells a humorous story about the southern way of life. This Georgia Picture Storybook Award nominee is about a spunky little girl faced with the dilemma of her first loose tooth. In the course of the plot, a teasing Uncle Tom asks her for an array of tools in order to perform the dreaded extraction. As he sends the narrator after the pliers, hammer, and finally a screwdriver, the apprehensive patient begins to suspect a joke and confides in the family dog, “It’s hard to know whether Uncle Tom is pulling my leg or my tooth” (Pulling My Leg, hereafter designated as Pulling 15). The southern expression, “pulling my leg,” used as the title and the punch line, tips the reader off that Carson’s book is a humorous look at one of childhood’s routine traumas and that the author, like Uncle Tom, is “pulling the leg” of the reader.

What singles out Pulling My Leg is the way Carson evokes image after image of
the eager little girl on her frantic search; the language and cadence mimic the speech patterns of a young child, and the details of the text illustrate southern life. In a fashion similar to those of her age, the narrator gives specific, and what adults often consider unnecessary, information such as how pork chops for dinner create a special problem with a wobbly front tooth. Other seemingly extraneous details crop up in her involved explanation of the tooth pulling incident, adding to the conversational, confessional style of the story. Examples of these colloquial tidbits that enrich and embellish the narrative are finding the pliers in “Grandpa’s tackle box (with the hooks and spinner and sinkers and line that sank deeper than I could see when we went fishing)” and locating the screwdriver in the garage where she “(looked for the blacksnake, Shakespeare, but he wasn’t in his usual place)” (Pulling 14). Carson readily inserts such specificities into this children’s book to create a realistic setting for the story. The narrator’s comments also provide folklife details as they show that a typical dinner in this southern household is pork chops, a typical recreation is fishing, and a typical occurrence is finding a snake in the garage.

More importantly, though, these elaborate tangents and stringing together of everything with “and’s” are characteristic of the speech patterns of young children who tend to overuse this coordinating conjunction to guarantee an uninterrupted narrative. So what appears as rambling to outsiders is Carson’s way of honoring a child’s (and some adults’) storytelling style. Because of its chattiness, Pulling My Leg has a distinct oral quality, and the book cries to be read aloud. In fact, it is most effective orally; mothers, librarians, teachers, or any other reader can assume that young, southern voice of the narrator, thus creating entertainment for both the listener and the reader. According to a School Library review, “This jovial story is a natural for dramatization” (Pulling 26). Therefore, it is an easy transition for Carson as she moves from the children’s book to her Swamp Gravy scripts, where she works to produce the same results: a re-creation of southern dialect in the words of the characters of all ages and a realistic depiction of the south Georgia way of life through the subjects of scenes.

Another one of her children’s books, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You, published in 1992, has elements similar to those found in Pulling My Leg, but it focuses on the serious subject of death. It, too, has a first person point of view with a willful little girl presenting
her story in a conversational style. While Pulling My Leg is all amusement, this story has both comic and tragic moments as the child learns first-hand about death. Once again the rhythm of the storytelling is essential as it mimics the short sentences of a young child. “We were at home. Daddy was cooking. Helen was watching TV,” are the rather ordinary beginning lines of the story which progresses from the matter-of-fact, choppy statements to a resonant tale of wondering what it is like to be dead and trying to figure out how to grieve (You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You, hereafter designated as Hold 1).

In spite of its sober theme, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You contains Carson’s characteristic humor. The little girl’s account of her reluctance to do housework brings a smile to the reader who remembers the feeling. “I wanted to be watching TV, but I was supposed to be cleaning up my room. I’d put stuff under the bed already, but Daddy said that wasn’t cleaning up, and then I got under the bed and Daddy got mad, so I was cleaning up my room really. I hate cleaning my room,” she confides (Hold 1). The inclusion of the word, “really,” placed strategically at the end of the sentence, helps define the character’s personality and gives the admission more clout while the sentence, “I hate cleaning my room,” immediately enlists the empathy of all readers, young and old alike, and establishes a bond of co-conspiracy or camaraderie in this opening passage.

The pet funeral described in the story by the little girl is something almost every child has experienced at one time or another. Pet mortality prepares the narrator somewhat for the death of her family member. “Died. A goldfish I knew died. We flushed him down the johnny. Helen’s hamster Henry died. His name was Henry Hamster. We buried him,” confides the storyteller (Hold 8). She then boasts of her eulogy: “I said a poem I made up. Dig, dig, dig, ‘cause Henry died, died, died” (Hold 8). The alliteration and the repetition of simple sentences and short words not only drive home the emphasis on death but add to the oral quality of the story and encourage an irreverent curling of the lips on the part of the reader.

This story is also rich with the concrete folklife details of death rituals from the gathering of the family members and dressing up for the occasion to the custom of bringing food to the mourners. By watching the adults, the narrator learns that it is acceptable to cry over a loss, and she realizes that human beings comfort one another through human touch. Her unfeeling “dig, dig, dig” funeral oration has changed by the
end of the story to, “You hold me and I’ll hold you. It’s what I’m going to say if I ever have to preach at another funeral” (Hold 24). Her one line conclusion, “It made me feel better,” on a page by itself is powerful in its conciseness and in its sharp contrast to the earlier loquacity (Hold 28).

You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You is a children’s book, but with its combination of humor and pathos, it speaks to any reader of any age. Roberta Herrin calls this book “Carson’s philosophical treatise on death” and says it recommends “a full-bodied laugh while holding on to the next person” as the coping mechanism for death (21-23).

Carson’s Swamp Gravy plays offer that same happy-sad mixture and that same ageless appeal. Also, like this children’s book, Carson’s community plays do not ignore the inevitability of death. Most of her plays for Swamp Gravy conclude with a scene about death, followed by a song and remembrances. In The Blue Doctor, it is the physician who dies of a heart attack, and in The Gospel Truth, it is the preacher who dies while The Rock and the Hard Place ends with the funeral of the Anglin brothers’ mother.

Regardless of the last scene’s content, all of Carson’s plays conclude with cast members singing “Amazing Grace” as they hold up lighted candles, call out names of the deceased and say, “I remember you.” This Swamp Gravy finale unites story and real life as this verbal tribute to those who have passed away allows a moment of mourning. It is the oral equivalent to the tactile solace the characters in You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You provide for each other.

In her third children’s book, The Great Shaking, published in 1994, Carson looks at the human condition from an unexpected perspective, not through a child’s eyes but through those of a bear. This story is based on the recorded history of Missouri, which documents earthquakes occurring in 1811 and 1812. To describe the natural disasters, Carson opts to use an animal as narrator; and, therefore, the account of the catastrophic events is devoid of humor and human interpretation. The reader is left with the deadpan delivery of the bear’s uninterrupted seriousness that somehow comes off as stuffiness, a human characteristic. Carson’s penchant for irony, the trademark of many of the scenes in her community plays, comes out full force in The Great Shaking.

Because the bear tells the story, the plight of the animals in the earthquake and their response to the disaster are the focus, and man’s fate becomes almost incidental.
When floods follow the quakes, the coping mechanism employed in the animal kingdom is mutual help. “Birds sought comfort in the company of creatures not of their kind. I had six wrens on my back. I saw a stag whose antlers were filled with crows. He did not like the company of crows, but he did not run them off,” says the bear (The Great Shaking, hereafter designated as Shaking 8). In contrast to the animals, the people mentioned secondarily in the story seek safety in religion, not in the company of others. “White people prayed to their God to spare them” while “red people hoped and prayed this was their Great Spirit moving to make the white people leave their lands and go back where they came from,” and “black people, many of whom were slaves, thought it might be their God’s way to set them free. They too had prayed,” the bear explains (Shaking 9). The animals’ reliance on each other for survival is in contrast to the people’s prayers to their gods for delivery from the earthquakes.

Throughout The Great Shaking, the bear looks at the animals first, then comments on the behavior of man; with this technique Carson can provide a portrait of opposites in the story. After the earthquakes, the bear stays, saying of the earth’s shift, “I have not moved; Mother moved, and it does not look the same. I had to find a new den” (Shaking 18). While the bear, lacking the ability to reason, never considers leaving the area, it observes the humans’ mixed reactions to the earthquakes as they wonder if they should relocate. Some of the people do decide to stay and rebuild, but “some moved away in search of steadier ground” (Shaking 19). Carson’s gift for irony tinges the last line of this section: “Those who remained resumed the hunting of bears” (Shaking 19). The quakes, although spectacular events, have had no lasting effect on mankind’s attitude towards nature and consequently results in no change in the status of the bear, destined to remain the prey of human hunters. Deceptive in its simplicity, this book reveals much about the nature of man, and Carson’s use of the bear as an objective narrator prevents polemic didacticism. There is no explicit judgment against mankind in the story; instead Carson allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. As she does in stories and The Gospel Truth, Carson leaves the audience members of Swamp Gravy to decide how to feel about the story. If she is telling a difficult story, one with moral implications, such as scenes in The Gospel Truth about molestation and racism, the playwright offers up the story but abstains from moralizing.
The Great Shaking is also important in understanding Carson’s reliance on oral history to write her community plays. With this unusual tale, Carson takes her first of many looks at what constitutes history. “In the spring, the wrens built their nests and raised their young and did not mention it. Wrens do not keep history. I do not know about crows, but I doubt they keep history either,” observes Carson’s bear in The Great Shaking (24). The contrast of textbook history to oral history is already visible here, and by the time Carson moves to the community play, she has discarded the notion of textbook history altogether. By generating scripts from oral histories, from the reminiscences of people, she honors the original storyteller and gives voice to his or her individual experience. Like the bear in The Great Shaking, those living out history are allowed to tell their own stories in Carson’s community plays.

The Last of ‘The Waltz across Texas’ and Other Stories is her collection of short stories, in which “the author’s tone is so direct that their [the characters’] momentary lives are real, provoking immediate pathos and humor” (Underwood 217). The book begins with another one of Carson’s talking animal tales, “Assumptions.” It is a brief story about a strange pair of hitchhikers, a one-legged man and a three-legged talking dog. After performing tricks on the side of the road, the dog attracts a motorist, who gives him a ride. “I didn’t know the son of a bitch was leaving me. I thought he was looking to get us both a ride,” is the concluding lament of the man left behind. These lines set the theme of loss for the entire collection of stories. Higgs, however, thinks something different is going on in these stories by Carson, that they are not so much about loss as they are about love. He says they all ask the question, “Where’s Love?” (13). Higgs calls Carson’s characters “love-haunted,” and explains, “I do not mean to limit the word ‘love’ to the erotic and romantic but include as well familial, communal, and divine love” (11). Whether it is the call of the “love-haunted,” the need for relationship, or the desire for community, this theme found repeatedly in her earlier poems and these short stories resurfaces in the Swamp Gravy plays.

What Higgs suggests is a love quest may also be interpreted as a sense of loss. All of Carson’s characters in her short stories suffer a loss -- of faith, love, employment, possessions, or life itself -- and all react to life’s circumstances. The one-legged hitchhiker just whines about his abandonment, but the other characters take action, in
some cases extreme action. Two stories in the collection deal with the issue of faith, and when Carson writes about religion it is not seen in a positive light. “His Father’s Work” is the grim tale of a fundamentalist preacher who kills his family with an ax, except for one son, who survives the intended lethal blow due to “an unruly mat of tangled red hair and an extraordinarily thick skull” (The Last of ‘The Waltz across Texas’ and Other Stories, hereafter designated Waltz 8). As an adult, the son continues his father’s work advertising himself as Rev. Evan King, the “Counselor for the Road to Heaven” (Waltz 9). While he prepares his sermon, “The Red Doom,” calling for repentance in the face of Judgment Day and ranting against communist forces in America, his wife waits in the welfare office to reapply for food stamps. The loss of faith in “His Father’s Work” does not refer to Evan’s loss but that of his wife, Margaret. She is willing to go along with her husband’s peculiar theology until it interferes with the food stamp allotment needed to feed their children. “Oh, stop it! You’re no preacher, you weren’t talking about God, you were talking about communists,” she tells him in front of the case worker (Waltz 24). Her loss of respect for her husband precedes the greater losses to come. The reverend later sets the fire that kills his whole family except one son, John. “It is John who preaches now the momentary arrival of Jesus Christ. It is his father’s work,” concludes the chilling story, leaving the reader to wonder what family atrocity of his own John will commit in the name of religion (Waltz 24). Reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor’s fondness for the grotesque, Carson in “His Father’s Work” depicts religious zealots as ignorant, irresponsible, and insane.

The last story in the collection, “Free Will,” also focuses on religion, but unlike “His Father’s Work,” which is devoid of humor, this one is maliciously funny. Carson’s biting satire and sarcasm in “His Father’s Work” gives way to a much lighter touch in “Free Will.” John Rupert leaves the “Free Will Church” and joins the “Old Time Church” after he and Raynell, his bride of four months, have a fight, and she tries to prevent him from going out by latching his Mustang to their mobile home with a logging chain. When the angry John Rupert breaks his toe by kicking a telephone pole, “It was that moment he decided that his was no longer a free will, that the forces in the universe were aligned in such a way that he, John Rupert, was predestined to a life of personal misery directed by somebody else, and there wasn’t any way of pretending anymore that things were
different” (Waltz 132). After his epiphany, he walks out of his Free Will Baptist Church as the preacher warns him, “You put your soul in danger” (Waltz 133). John Rupert then hobbles across the road to the Old Time Baptist Church, where he encounters Charles Wilkerson, who “fished a pint bottle of cheap red whiskey from underneath his car seat,” explaining, “I carry it for emergencies and this appears to be one” (Waltz 136). John Rupert gets drunk and tries to snap the chain on his car. Instead of freeing the beloved Mustang, he snatches the trailer off its foundations and sends Ray Nell’s cherished furniture flying. He yells to her, “I’ve done this of my own free will and it’s got nothing to do with God!” (Waltz 141). Along with the theological discourse of John Rupert and the preachers and Wilkerson’s more liberal ideas about religion, Carson includes the narrow views of Raynell’s mother, who tells her daughter, “You’ve got to get a divorce, honey, there ain’t never been anybody I’m kin to, even by marrying, that’s backed out of the Free Wills, much less converted, and it’s not low life like John Rupert that’s gonna start” (Waltz 130). In this short story, the characters do not appear particularly love-haunted as Higgs would suggest but most definitely illustrate a sense of loss. All the characters in Carson’s stories who “get religion” somehow seem to lose their wits, if they had any to lose.

Both short stories, so different in tone, are interesting antecedents to The Gospel Truth, Carson’s Swamp Gravy play about religion. In it, Carson chooses to tell the story of a fiery preacher, also firm in his convictions; however, unlike the preachers in her short stories, he is an admirable character. In the play, interwoven with the preacher’s story, are other scenes focusing on the Ten Commandments, and in these vignettes she allows for theological questioning. Is it a sin to steal if a person is in need? The answer to this question is “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” Carson’s monologue about an elderly woman who steals necessities from the grocery store when she runs out of money at the end of the month. In another scene, Carson asks the audience, “What exactly does ‘covet’ mean?” Unexpectedly, she aligns this commandment with a story about the molestation of children by a respected church deacon. Her choice of subject matter gives a strange twist to this commandment. Another example is her scene, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” and it is destabilizing as well. In it, she avoids the obvious story of a premeditated murder in lieu of war-time killing. Using the World War II oral history of a man searching for his son
missing in action, Carson complicates this commandment, giving viewers something to contemplate about killing. Is it justified in circumstances such as war? Carson manages a subtle condemnation of war while telling the story of the lost son. With her look at religion and human transgressions in *The Gospel Truth*, the irony in her short stories remains, but the blatant satire of “His Father’s Work” and outrageous humor of “Free Will” are replaced by a more serious approach. Although Carson’s play for Swamp Gravy certainly shows a continued exploration of religious themes, it lacks her earlier outright rejection and ridicule of religion found in her short stories.

Along with the spiritual crisis in “Free Will,” Carson also inserts a look at matrimony. Although John Rupert is a discontented husband, Raynell maintains, “John Rupert and me said vows to each other and we’re gonna keep them” (*Waltz* 142). She appears more stubborn than “love-haunted” and simply will not allow for a loss of love, or more specifically for the loss of her lawfully wedded husband. Introduced earlier by Carson in the short story collection as a dating couple in “Big Yellow Onions,” the reader already knows John Rupert and Raynell were never a match made in heaven. Instead they each pursue the relationship driven not by love but by their own separate desires, his for sex and hers for furniture. During their courtship in the first story, John Rupert lusts after Raynell’s body, prompted by his fantasies of a nude girl in a calendar on the produce room wall of the grocery store where he works. In contrast, Raynell has her own agenda; she sees John Rupert not so much as a potential love mate or prospective husband but as a means to acquire the furniture she admires in the *House Beautiful* magazines she reads at the beauty parlor where she works as the shampoo girl. “Big Yellow Onions” ends with the couple having a huge fight over Raynell taking off her bra for John Rupert. Therefore, when they reappear in “Free Will,” the reader is not surprised to see them as two immovable wills now doing matrimonial battle. Carson uses these companion stories to examine the nature of erotic, romantic, and divine love. Through John Rupert and Raynell’s flawed relationship, the writer is able to question what does it mean to be in relationship. Stated another way, all of Carson’s characters, like John Rupert and Raynell, search for a sense of community. The characters in her poems, short stories, and plays share a longing to belong to another person, to a family, to a place; they lack community.

Similar to “Big Yellow Onions” and “Free Will” are four more short stories, which
focus on difficult relationships. “Hunting Husbands,” “The Last of the ‘Waltz across Texas,’” “Sweet Rage,” and “Maybe,” all have characters rebelling against each other and violating the vows of marriage. Instead of the husband trying to leave, in “Hunting Husbands,” it is two wives who have become tired of their taken-for-granted existence. They cram the children in the car and head off. It is June’s car, but the wild one, Rowena, drives and takes charge of the situation. When they left home, June thought they were going in search of their own husbands, who could easily be found drinking beer at the local bar. The two, though, end up at a campground with a little bit of money and two charge cards to begin what Rowena refers to as “hunting husbands.” There Rowena, decked out in cut-offs and a midriff top, begins a quite different quest while June stays behind to feed the children supper and to put up the tent, purchased on credit with her J.C. Penney charge card that her husband does not know she has. Ironically, by the end of the story, it is timid June, whom both her mother and Rowena have accused of having no backbone, with the new resolve. “I’m thinking about what Rowena said and she is wrong. Out here, alone, leaning against the windshield like this, I can feel my backbone” (Waltz 51). While Rowena is simply looking for another man to replace her deadbeat husband, June has moved toward autonomy and liberation. She may ultimately take Little Gene and go home to Big Gene, but she will not go home the same woman. “Hunting Husbands” has a feminist flavor that Carson later infuses in her play, Daytrips, and in her community plays for Swamp Gravy. Once again, though, when she turns to drama, the wild humor of the short story is tamed. The Gospel Truth, where one woman talks about her marital missteps in “Honor,” and The Blue Doctor and Special Edition, where two women recount a history of abuse, have a serious treatment of marriage not found in “Hunting Husbands.”

“The Last of the ‘Waltz across Texas’” exhibits a tone more like Carson’s later plays. The short story collection is named after this one piece, which tells the story of hard-drinking, irresponsible Ralph, who goes to Nancy to seek reconciliation. As the story unfolds, it is clear to the reader there have been many similar scenes of his begging to come back, promising to do better, and Nancy taking him back. When he fails to move her with words this time, he proposes a dance to “Last Waltz across Texas,” their song played on the occasions of their engagement and their wedding. These sentimental
remembrances cause Nancy, now the mother of two, to falter momentarily: “Nancy almost said I don’t hate you, Ralph, she almost said I love you. Instead she said, ‘I just can’t do it anymore’” (Waltz 128). When she refuses the dance offered and utters her rejection of him, Ralph tries to save face, saying to tell the children it was he that gave up on the marriage. He exits, and Nancy surmises he is headed to his favorite bar. In this story, Carson once again focuses on the difficulties of love relationships, on the repetitive fights in bad marriages. She shows in “Free Will,” “Hunting Husbands,” and “The Last of ‘The Waltz across Texas’” that no matter how bad the relationship is it is still hard to sever ties. Even so, the character, Nancy, true to Carson’s feminist stance, resolves to finally send Ralph on his way. Her need to be free of his drinking and broken promises overcomes her need for community and her obvious love for him.

While Nancy shows strength in refusing to allow her husband to return in “Last Waltz,” Pearl makes sure her son-in-law can never return in “Sweet Rage.” In this short story told from Pearl’s point of view, the reader learns that she has frequently harbored her daughter after beatings and verbal abuse from her husband. This time, though, Crystal is pregnant when Bobby hits her in the stomach. When she assures Pearl that she loves Bobby, her mother replies, “You can love him to death, you know, it’s just you that dies of it” (Waltz 86). On this particular occasion after Crystal goes to bed, Pearl cannot sleep; she feels compelled to get up, put on her clothes, and, prompted by the voice of rage, she goes to give Bobby a good talking to. However, instead of rousing the passed-out Bobby, she lets rage take over and bashes his head. Her weapon is a family heirloom, a Civil War cannon ball “that had come through the wall of her grandmother’s house a hundred and some odd years before,” given to Pearl and then passed on to Crystal when she married (Waltz 89). In typical Carson irony, the item from the family’s history ends the history of violence in the marriage.

With the setting as the jail after the crime, this short story is the closest Carson comes to psychological analysis. Her description of rage as a physical companion is unnerving; it has allowed Pearl to take action she would have never, ever attempted on her own, and then abandons her in the cell. When it leaves, she covers her head with a blanket. The story ends with the daughter trying to rip the blanket off her mother and hysterically condemning her for killing her husband. Crystal calls her mother a murderer,
and Pearl ends up looking like a psychopath to her and to her jailers but not necessarily to the reader. “Sweet Rage” has a strong feminist element as it explores the idea of women’s personal empowerment and the risks associated with this. The short story features a main character who is female and one who certainly takes definitive action to preserve the life of her daughter and unborn grandchild.

The physical violence experienced by Crystal and exhibited by Pearl in the earlier short story is a theme in Carson’s community plays. In The Gospel Truth scene, “Honor,” an African American female like Nancy in “Last Waltz,” decides to end a relationship with her abusive husband. Carson later writes another scene, “Brown Dress,” which is very reminiscent of “Sweet Rage.” Carson read Colquittan Edith McDuffie’s oral history in Swamp Gravy: Folk Tales of South Georgia and used this story to create her scene that debuts in The Blue Doctor and is reprised in Special Edition. As Pearl does in “Sweet Rage,” the woman in this scene takes action to protect her female child. This victim of domestic violence shoots her husband with his own shotgun to prevent another beating of her daughter. As long as she was the target of the violence, the woman remains passive; it is in defense of her child that she resorts to violence. After the shooting, she in Pearl-like fashion is at a loss to explain her actions. She says, “I don’t know why it was this time and not some other,” and adds, “I’m not proud of what I’ve done” but concludes that her only regret is “that I did not do it sooner” (Special Edition 47). Although Carson’s first treatment of domestic violence is poetic in stories I ain’t told nobody yet and fictional in “Sweet Rage,” she later latches on to the same topic in her community plays, using a factual account of abuse. Swamp Gravy’s “Brown Dress” is about violent relationships, about love and marriage gone bad, but it is also about female empowerment. Throughout her writing career, Carson seems to zero in on the subject of women being beaten up by men, but in each instance her female characters either get the last word, the last blow, or the first shot. While Carson’s female characters may start out as victims of violence, they do not stay that way.

In fact, in her short story, “Maybe,” it is the female character, Dessa, who is the angry aggressor and resorts to violence against her man. In this story, Carson employs the first person point of view, or what she prefers to call direct address, a technique that becomes characteristic of her Swamp Gravy plays. However, she presents different
perspectives in a love triangle: Brenda, Harry, and Dessa. After living with Dessa for fourteen years, living with “maybe” all that time because Dessa would never agree to marry him, Harry goes off to Nashville, meets Brenda, and marries her two weeks later. The short story begins with Brenda telling of her situation, followed by Harry, who is going home with his bride and dreading the announcement of his wedding to Dessa. The third voice the reader hears is that of Dessa, who obviously loves Harry but has refused to marry him all these years, not because of anything he has or has not personally done, but because of her distrust of the institution of marriage. Harry, however, is tired of waiting for a commitment from her. “People get married to each other and marrying is deciding I do or I don’t, I am or I ain’t. It’s drawing some lines,” he explains (Waltz 56).

Although Dessa has been indecisive for fourteen years, she makes an instant decision and takes definitive action when Harry announces he has married Brenda. Dessa pulls Harry’s gun out of the kitchen drawer and shoots him with it. Rather than kill him, though, she aims for his leg. Because the new wife, Brenda, cannot operate a stick shift, Dessa drives Harry and Brenda to the hospital to keep him from bleeding to death. By the end of the story, the reader likes all three characters and, through the rotating system of direct address with each one telling his or her side of the story at different intervals, clearly understands how this incident occurs. Harry gets in the last word over the two females as he confides of Dessa, “And then she’s gonna tell you I brought Brenda back home and was throwing her out. I guess I was, but why the hell did she wait till then to tell me something? ‘You bastard,’ she said, ‘I love you!’ And then she shot me” (Waltz 65). As Higgs has suggested, these Carson characters in “Maybe” are asking quite plaintively, “Where’s love?”

In another of her short stories, “Splitshin,” the question, “Where’s Love?” becomes only a partly philosophical one. The narrator begins by talking about a trip up to Splitshin mountain after a visit to the funeral home to see his buddy, Hascel. “I don’t know if it was the liquor or the grief – both, I guess – but George and I woke up on Splitshin about dawn, covered with bug bites, cold to the bone and a little hung over. George and me but Love wasn’t there,” confesses the storyteller (Waltz 97). He then goes to check on his sister, Lucy, who is the wife of the deceased. When he gets there, she, too, wants to know, “Where’s Love?” (Waltz 99). Love is the brother of the dead man,
and Lucy needs him to help her select the pallbearers for the funeral. So the question at this point in the story becomes a literal one.

After Lucy gets a call from the funeral director, a new question is added: Where is Hascel? Her husband’s body is missing from the funeral home. The next few pages are macabre humor, once again very Flannery O’Connoresque, as Lucy, the narrator, and the funeral director try to figure out what happened to the body. Maybe Hascel is not really dead, hopes the storyteller, only to be quickly assured by the funeral director who prepared the body for burial that he is most definitely dead. Instead of going home to face the mourning relatives gathered at Lucy’s house and having to announce the body is missing, the narrator drives her and the funeral director up to Splitshin to give them all a moment to think the situation over. It is on Splitshin that they find both a still-drunk Love and a still-dead Hascel.

In his denial of his brother’s death, Love has taken Hascel (his corpse) out drinking. The story ends with the narrator, Lucy, and Love in the front seat and Hascel’s body angled in the back seat with the funeral director perched on the edge of the seat with the corpse. As he sobers up a bit, Love looks back at “Hascel lying there sort of catty-corner on the seat, looking dead, just god-awful dead and old somehow” (Waltz 110). He then looks at Lucy and says, “He did die, didn’t he?” to which she replies, “Looks like it, don’t it, Love?” (Waltz 110). “That’s hard, that’s just damned stinking hard. That ain’t what anybody wanted,” he then tells her (Waltz 110). “Bingo,” is Lucy’s unemotional single word response. Going against gender stereotypes, Carson has the male character, Love, express his grief in actions and words while the laconic, stoical wife of Hascel is characteristic of Carson’s female characters in her earlier works and later in her plays who can experience terrible tragedies and tell their stories without emotion.

With Lucy’s concluding remark of “Bingo,” the story, “Splitshin,” shifts from Love’s pathos to the narrator’s pragmatism. As the narrator heads the car down Splitshin Mountain, he admits, “I was scared by this time we would run out of gas, when more likely than with a dead man propped in the back seat?” (Waltz 111). This short story by Carson reads like a scene from the Swamp Gravy plays with its use of direct address, its rich southern language, its strong female character, and its irreverent humor. Also the details of the funeral preparation and the comments of the mourners in this short story
provide folklife details similar to the ones Carson includes in her children’s book, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You and in her funeral scene in the Swamp Gravy play, The Rock and the Hard Place. From the poems in stories, starting with Willis Comfort in “Prologue” to her short stories and plays, Carson looks at death as it affects others. She never allows for tears when she writes about the loss of a loved one. Each time she approaches this serious subject with varying degrees of humor, which is usually unsettling to the reader or audience, but which is closer to life experiences.

“Stories from the Night the Family Received Friends at a Kentucky Farmer’s Funeral” by Carson is another look at death and its accompanying rituals. This story has multiple voices represented as family and friends who converge at the home of the deceased to view the body and mourn Parker’s passing. The first anecdote told about the dead farmer, Parker, centers on his mule, Henry. When the mule refused to cross Hard Creek for the second time in one day, Parker shot him. This initial illustration reveals Parker’s strong will and lack of patience. The women in the kitchen then discuss his opposition to coal mining while Wilson in the living room remembers how Parker provided the miners living on company land with a plot of ground for a garden of their own. One son recounts the death of his brother, Ben, in a mining accident, for which Parker blamed the company: “Ben dying or dying underground or something set so hard with Daddy he wasn’t about to see it any other way” (Waltz 31). Another acquaintance talks about Parker’s politics, describing how he gets up and leaves in the middle of a tent revival. “You know my trouble ain’t with the Lord. My trouble is that I am a Republican married into a nest of Democrats,” Parker is quoted as saying (Waltz 31). That comment by Parker lets the reader know the deceased was not overly concerned about religion but had strong political opinions. Still another person praises his talent as a fiddle player and tells of his borrowing a hound dog to tune a deaf musician’s guitar: “Parker hauled that dog in there, pestered at him till the dog started baying, and said it was a perfect D and old Walter Honaker could hear that dog” (Waltz 32). This story certainly adds humor and shows another facet of Parker as a musician, but the word, “pestered,” once again shows his persistent nature.

The last account explains the cause and timing of Parker’s death. It reveals his love of the land and its loss as well as his final act of strong will. Interlaced in each person’s
story of the dead man are comments about his attachment to the land, his love for dairy farming, and his disdain for coal mining. In this final portrait, the reader learns the deceased ignored his convictions and sold his land to the mining company with the money “counted out ten thousand in hundred dollar bills to give to Parker but Parker said he didn’t want to live to see it” (Waltz 33). The story ends as the narrator observes, “I always did admire a man could keep his word” (Waltz 33). Twenty minutes before the mining operation began on his land, “Parker got out of this world riding on a heart attack” (Waltz 33). Although he sold out to the mining company, he could not live with the results.

This short story with its multiple voices is like “Maybe” and a piece Carson writes for Swamp Gravy called “Quartet.” Used as the climatic scene in Good Medicine, “Quartet” is similar to Parker’s story in that it focuses on a heart attack victim and the timing of his death. Like Parker and his love of the land, the person spotlighted in the Swamp Gravy scene has a great passion, gospel music. He has a history of heart attacks and tells his fellow gospel group members his greatest wish would be to die while singing with them. In both the short story and the play scene, Carson presents the subject’s death through the words of many. Those in the singing group give the audience the background story and also recount the story of his fatal heart attack during one of their performances at a little country church. One group member is a registered nurse who administered CPR until the ambulance could arrive ends the scene, assuring the audience she did everything she knew how to do and that the deceased got what he wanted. With several characters as storytellers, Carson offers a community voice and allows those who knew and loved the deceased to perpetuate the lives of the departed through their telling of their stories.

In “The Governor,” set in Virginia, Carson moves from the personal account of one man told by many to the political arena of a coal miners’ strike documented by one narrative voice. While “Stories from the Night the Family Received Friends at a Kentucky Farmer’s Funeral” looks at the effects of mining only on Parker’s life and land, Carson uses broad humor in “The Governor” to condemn the entire industry. The author’s choice of storyteller or speaker of direct address in this story is unexpected. Instead of a miner, it is a woman on the picket line, who confides, “Those men got pictures of me doing things I never did before in my life. Standing on a picket line was
only one of them” (Waltz 36).

From her perspective as the mother of a sixteen-year-old son, she can stand in the path of moving trucks and stare down “scabs.” Calling the drivers hired by the company a “bunch of young’uns,” she admits, “Later, I’d holler and ask those boys if their mothers knew what they were doing, but I didn’t that first time. I was afraid it might push him over the edge and he’d run right over me” (Waltz 37). She says the governor of the state has called in the police because he “is ‘interested’ in coal and we were sitting down in front of the trucks to keep them from going in and loading” (Waltz 37). Next the governor calls in the state troopers transported by a variety of motorized vehicles along with SWAT teams, dogs, and helicopters.

Up against such legal manpower and high-powered equipment, the narrator, a Sunday school teacher, finds the situation tense until the “Governor” arrives. A man drives up in a truck and announces to the law enforcement agents, “I got the Governor on the line and he’s decided to come down here and inspect the spitshine on your shoes” (Waltz 38). He then grabs a rattlesnake behind its head, lifts it out of the bag tied with a piece of twine, and puts the snake down at the feet of the troopers. As he pretends to be the governor’s assistant, he says, “Law, it’s a snake pit up there at the capital” (Waltz 39). With the introduction of the snake and through her particular narrative voice, Carson turns the politically-charged story of a coal miners’ strike into a tall tale. In “The Governor,” as in Swamp Gravy, she capitalizes on the humor even in retelling life’s worst situations. Carson’s characters manage to save face and to find humor in spite of adversity. Her poems, short stories, and scenes for community performance focus on working class people, like the coal miners, trying to make a living, and Carson tells the stories of those who might otherwise be ignored.

Her continued interest in coal mining is evident in her play, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, the recipient of the 1993 Roger L. Steven Award given in recognition of new American plays. Based on an actual trial and coal miners’ strike, this play, published in 1994, is Carson’s first attempt to create drama out of history. In this play, which is discussed in Chapter Four of the dissertation, she intersperses her fictional characters with such well known figures of the day as Theodore Dreiser. As evidenced in the short story, The Great Shaking, and in this play, Carson can use history as a base for
her fiction. The rather straight-forward, almost documentary-style of history in A Preacher with a Horse to Ride softens or blurs in her Swamp Gravy plays. Personal accounts of an event and the stories of individuals replace the large-scale scope of Preacher.

Another very different play written by Carson before she began her work with Swamp Gravy is Daytrips. Originally produced as a workshop in 1988, by the Road Company of Johnson City, Tennessee, in co-production with Virginia Polytechnic Institute of Blacksberg, Virginia, it premiered at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in September, 1989. The play received the Kesselerring Award for best new American play in 1989. Daytrips was presented again at the Hartford Stage Company in Hartford, Connecticut, in March, 1990, and at the Women’s Project and Production in New York City on October 30, 1990, before being published in 1991. It is also anthologized in New American Plays Two, published by Heinemann. This earlier play with its folklife and feminist elements contributes to the development of the community play by Carson. Daytrips includes folklife details which depict rural Tennessee in the 1980’s and focuses particularly on the life of women, three generations in the same family. The daughter is partially responsible for the care of her mother, a victim of Alzheimer’s disease, and for her grandmother, a victim of stroke and dementia.

Due to the impaired states of both Irene and Rose, the mundane events of everyday life -- dressing, meal times, car trips -- become heroic struggles for Pat, the daughter. Pat puts Irene’s coat on her, and Irene takes it off and throws it on the floor. Shoes have to be negotiated around Irene’s absent mind and Rose’s resistant bunions. A simple errand such as having Rose’s prescription filled turns into a quest when she insists on having her lifelong pharmacist do the job. He has left the old drugstore downtown to go to work somewhere else, a place Rose cannot remember.

With a little detective work, Pat finds the company’s name on the empty medicine bottle, but there are four Revcos located on highways in Kingsport, and Rose cannot recall the pharmacist’s name. As Carson maneuvers the women in and out of the car in a succession of stops, she gives a concise picture of Pat’s frustrations and of her everyday life in Tennessee as the caregiver of two incapacitated relatives. At the fourth and last Revco, Rose spots her man behind the counter, confiding to him, “We had a right smart
time a findin’ you” (Daytrips 22). This understatement, and totally southern expression, is characteristic of Rose’s speech. While Pat and Irene could be from anywhere, Rose is the voice of rural Tennessee. “What are you studyin’?” Rose asks, using “studying” for thinking, another characteristic southernism (Daytrips 42). Then as she lies in the emergency room, Rose’s medical assessment is “My head feels so quare [sic]” (Daytrips 47). Carson’s use of dialect adds a folklife flavor to Daytrips that becomes the idiom of Swamp Gravy.

The writer’s eye for specific detail, however, does not stop with the language. She also incorporates into the play references to rural southern food items. When Pat, Irene, and Rose stop off to visit Aunt Bee, she offers them some of her homemade souse. Rose adamantly refuses it, but the narrator takes the time to explain, “It’s a Thanksgiving delicacy in some places because that’s about the time hogs are slaughtered. Bee was late, this was the Sunday after but the hogs’ heads had been a gift, and an impoverished old woman will make souse meat on Friday and give thanks for weeks” (Daytrips 24). Carson even provides visual and olfactory images of “a big platter of brown jellied glob that filled the room with a smell reminiscent of canned dog food” (Daytrips 25). Rose wants apples; Pat’s father has sent her some so that she can make jelly, which the narrator says “runs like syrup and never jells” (Daytrips 34). Such details, which become standard inclusions in Carson’s community plays to give them their folklife dimension, abound in this earlier work.

The characters and the plot, however, are the feminist elements of Daytrips. Carson has only female characters on stage. Pat’s father and Irene’s husband, Price, is discussed throughout the play, but he never appears in person. The absent male has obviously been important in the lives of all three women, yet he does not appear, thereby, giving the focus to the female characters. Unlike Susan Glaspell, who effectively builds plays around the absent character in Trifles and Allison’s House, Carson is not trying for the same effect with the absent Price. Instead she delegates him to a secondary, almost insignificant position similar to that of the humans in the bear’s telling of The Great Shaking.

While Daytrips is strong on the character of women, it is short on plot. There is no clearly defined beginning, middle, or end. All scenes seem repetitious and fragmented,
with three dreams interspersed in the action. Pat dreams of the death of her mother and grandmother. Her first dream has her leading them out into the ocean, where they keep walking away from the shore, walking on the bottom with water over their heads as she watches without trying to stop them. Pat’s second is a dream of sleep. All three of the women are in the same bed, and she smothers her mother, then her grandmother, both of whom express pleasure at her action. Her final dream is one of fire, and in this last dream, Rose is actively urging Pat to strike the match.

These three dreams of causing or contributing to their deaths, along with the continuous miscommunication between characters, reinforce the circular action and nonclimactic conclusion. Rose thinks Pat is her dead daughter, Helen, while Irene thinks Pat is another dead person, Olivia. Their constant referrals to Pat by the wrong names add to the confusion. Through both the repetitive actions and verbal circumlocutions, Carson is able to convey Pat’s total sense of isolation and helplessness. Ironically, the two older women think Pat is someone already deceased while she wishes they were both already dead. The play ends with all three women trapped in the same patterns.

When Carson writes Swamp Gravy’s The Rock and the Hard Place, she revisits Daytrips. In her recurring scenes about a Miller County school superintendent and her daughter, Carson eliminates the grandmother found in the earlier play but retains the mother with Alzheimer’s disease. Instead of presenting the superintendent as a strong woman in her prime, Carson opts to show her as an old woman whose personality is a merging of Irene and Rose. She, too, is lost in the past, paranoid, and dependent like Irene but with a mean streak like Rose. Daytrips definitely serves as the model for Carson’s later look at Alzheimer’s in her community play. With its cast of all female characters, its subject matter of everyday life, and plotless progression, this play is also the first clear example of Carson’s feminist drama. The feminist elements apparent in this early work grow stronger with each subsequent play written for Swamp Gravy.

Like her children’s books, poetry, and short stories, Daytrips is filled with Carson humor and Carson expressions. By the nature of its focus on Alzheimer’s, it could be unrelieved pathos, but the playwright lightens a bleak situation with dark humor. For example, Rose says the sofa “got irened,” her way of showing her disdain when Irene reupholsters a sofa belonging to her dead sister, Helen (Daytrips 41). “It wasn’t Helen’s
sofa anymore, and she brought it back over here and had them movers plop it down in my living room. And yonder it is. I don’t care who sits on it. If it was Helen’s I’d care. But it got irened” (Daytrips 41).

Higgs, of course, would call the verb, “irened.” another example of a “Carson.”

Rose later has a conversation with the ghost of Helen. “You plan to stand there till I die? I been waitin’ a right smart time myself, no tellin’ how long you’ll have to wait,” she tells her (Daytrips 42). She then orders Pat/the ghost, “Get in there and get you a bite of jelly. I made it. It ain’t good but you could taste it” (Daytrips 42). During her hospital stay, Rose has decided it is time for her to die. When she is told that she only has an ear infection and must get up and leave, she responds, “Lord, Lord, Lord” (Daytrips 50). Then the narrator dryly observes: “It was an unwelcome resurrection, embarrassing after you have announced your intention to leave the world and spoken your last words” (Daytrips 50). Both Irene in her actions and Rose in her words are unintentionally humorous. Pat remains grim, but the play does not. The humor that audiences come to expect in the Swamp Gravy plays is Daytrips’ saving grace.

While this play has similarities to the community play in its folklife roots, feminist features, and characteristic Carson humor, it has an unusual character doubling. There are three characters: Narrator/Pat, who are the same person with two actors playing her; Ree/Irene, who are the same person with the same actor playing Ree as the Alzheimer’s patient and also Irene as the younger, healthy person; and Rose, who is consistently only one character played by one person. Added to this already complicated character representation is the Narrator’s ability to assume the role of all the other characters with whom Pat, Ree/Irene, and Rose come in contact. For instance, the Narrator becomes the druggist, Aunt Bee, Rose’s neighbor, and the emergency room nurse. The Narrator also introduces the three dream sequences, and then Pat takes over the narrative. Although confusing in terms of action, the shifts in character by Pat could be Carson’s way of showing she does not have a life of her own; her existence is bound by the needs and actions of her mother and grandmother. Perhaps she is fragmented, has no clear self identity, because of their dependence on her.

This splitting of narrator and character found in Daytrips becomes a standard storytelling technique in the community play. The Blue Doctor has a narrator or
storyteller walk into a scene and become part of it and act it out. “Story of Stories” is presented in this fashion. Later in a scene from *The Gospel Truth* called “Dishwater Chicken,” a preacher’s wife tells about going to Sunday dinner at the homes of church members. She addresses the audience directly, confessing her reluctance to sit down to a meal in less than clean surroundings. After she takes her place at the table and interacts with others in the scene, the character also continues to talk to the audience, confiding that she intends to fake a fainting spell to get out of eating the chicken and dumplings that look like dishwater. The technique of having one person serve as both the narrator and character in the scene is a variation of the doubling in *Daytrips*; the use of Pat/Narrator in that play becomes an effective storytelling device in Carson’s plays written for Colquitt.

The staging for most Swamp Gravy scenes can be traced to *Daytrips*. Carson uses a minimalist approach to props and setting. The living room sofa serves as Irene’s dressing room one minute and Pat’s car the next. A table is Rose’s kitchen. Hence, the scenes materialize instantly, and the viewer relies on imagination and dialogue to complete the set. The sparseness of the set and the rapid succession of scenes create a fluid feel in *Daytrips* that flows through all of Carson’s community plays. A small table becomes the Blue Doctor’s office; a rocking chair, the living room for the family in “Story of Stories”; a crate and imaginary reins, a horse and buggy in *The Gospel Truth*; and a few benches, the church during a funeral in *The Rock and the Hard Place*.

From her significant body of work already produced before the Swamp Gravy plays, Carson appropriates a broad range of elements. Her poems, children’s book, short stories, and plays have the characteristics that coalesce in the community plays. She takes what makes her a successful writer in these other genres and applies it to her work for Swamp Gravy. True stories of a community lend themselves readily to her established style of writing. By incorporating intricate details of everyday life and feminist motifs and relying on her other practiced techniques of storytelling, humor, and language, Carson achieves the blend found in the Swamp Gravy scripts. The essential ingredient to this tried-and-true mixture is the oral histories of Colquitt’s citizens, the subject of Chapter Two.
CHAPTER TWO
A CUPFUL OF ORAL HISTORY

To create scripts for the Swamp Gravy project in Colquitt, Georgia, Jo Carson begins with the oral histories of the community. Richard Geer, Swamp Gravy director and founder who recommended Carson for the project, says, “The phrase ‘oral history’ is politically astute. It denotes living memory and connotes nostalgia and the conservation of tradition, but features the voices of those excluded from mainstream history,” (“Out of Control”107). To Carson, oral history is the stories of individuals told in their own words. While she uses the terms, oral history and storytelling, interchangeably, she prefers storytelling to Geer’s oral history. The word, history, in itself implies a truth, one person’s or many persons’ version of an event while Carson, in talking about her writing, humorously cautions, “Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story” (“Personal Interview,” September, 1994). Geer also notes the southern penchant for storytelling, observing, “Northerners tell stories and call it therapy. Southerners tell stories and call it swappin’ lies” (“Personal Interview,” September, 1994). For Carson, sometimes stretching the truth intensifies the story; “Picasso said art is a lie that tells the truth. That’s the nature of fiction, but my plays are oral histories, not a lie. They just make the truth more evident” (“Email Interview,” October, 2004). In her scene-writing for community performance, she pursues a very personal, very fragmented, and very selective view of Colquitt’s past and applies her dramatic license. Historical accuracy is not Carson’s or even Geer’s agenda in the Swamp Gravy project; it is the telling of people’s stories that matters.

A believer and practitioner in the art of storytelling, Carson is more insistent on oral tradition than on oral history. Her definition of oral tradition is not the same as such scholars as J.A. Cuddon, who specifies it as poetry “composed orally, or made up as the poet goes along oral tradition” which is “the product of illiterate or semi-literate societies” (659). Carson takes note of her own and other people’s stories, writes them down her way, either as poetry, short stories, essays, or plays, and then shares them through her writing or speaking. She frequently performs her own work as a one-woman show, reading to the audience her poetic monologues and dialogues or telling the stories
she has gathered and shaped over the years. The preservation of stories and a reliance on
the spoken word in Carson’s work represent transmission of a culture, not of Cuddon’s
semi-literate people, but of any group of people who want to remember the past and pass
it on to future generations.

As she embarked on the Swamp Gravy project in 1991, her beliefs about oral
history or storytelling were not unique. Books such as Woman, Native, Other were
already in circulation, and Trinh Minh-ha’s “Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a
story,” echoes Carson’s emphasis on storytelling over history (119). “When history
separated itself from story, it started indulging in accumulation and facts,” says Min-ha,
who equates the textbook version of history with men and the stories of a culture with
women (119). Although Min-ha sees history as a male domain, it is the women of
Colquitt who have become both the historians and the storytellers. Women were
responsible for writing the local history book. In 1980, more than a decade before Swamp
Gravy, the Colquitt Garden Club, composed only of women with county historian, Nellie
Cook Davis as author, published The History of Miller County, Georgia, 1856-1980.
“This book is based on factual history; it is not a genealogical compilation though many
have been studied,” Davis assures the reader in a chapter which highlights the “pioneers”
of the community, all patriarchs (13-22). So Colquitt already had its own history book,
conceived and written by women, but, as Min-ha accurately predicts, it was filled with
the names of prominent male citizens who left their mark on the community. For
instance, Chapter Five focuses on the formation of the county itself named in honor of
Andrew Jackson Miller, a Georgia senator from Augusta. Similarly, Chapter Seven
explains the origin of Colquitt’s name; the county seat is a tribute to another politician,
the former judge, state senator, and U.S. representative and senator, Walter Terry
Colquitt. Other sections cover original inhabitants (Indians), first white visitors (Spanish),
county officials, county communities, agriculture, churches, the United States Post
Office, schools, medical history, the railroad, cemeteries, banks, organizations. There are
also three appendices: Appendix I, Military History; Appendix II, Miller County Census
– 1860 and 1900; and Appendix III, Miller County Business Directory 1980.

When the Swamp Gravy project got underway in 1991, the Colquitt/Miller Arts
Council, unlike the Colquitt Garden Club with its history book of facts and dates, set out
to record a very different kind of history, an oral history of the community that would also be a performance piece. Initiated once again by the women, this group would gather stories of everyday people, both males and females, adults and children. These stories would later be transcribed, archived and published and would ultimately be used as a basis for Swamp Gravy’s community play.

The oral history/storygathering project, Swamp Gravy, officially began in June of 1991, when California native and Chicago resident, Richard Geer, made his first trip to Colquitt at the insistence of a local citizen and woman of vision, Joy Jinks. She wanted to see a play written about her hometown but had more of a traditional historical pageant in mind until she talked to Geer (“Personal Interview,” September, 1991). During that visit in June, Geer and Jinks met for the first time with the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council officers and other community leaders, only one of whom was male. At this session, the name Swamp Gravy, suggested by the arts council president, Dot Wainright, was decided upon by the group as the official title of the community project, and seven months later action began with oral history collection (“Colquitt/Miller Arts Council Minutes,” designated hereafter as CMAC, June, 1991).

To introduce this process, Dr. Mariella Hartsfield of Bainbridge College and Maggie Holtzberg of the University of Georgia came to Colquitt to lead an oral history gathering workshop. At this first phase of training, funded by the Georgia Humanities Council, those in attendance learned techniques of interviewing and the importance of documentation and received instructions on the operation of tape recorders. The two experts provided sample questions for the prospective interviewers and cautioned against yes-no questions. In one group session, those in attendance worked on wording other questions that would guide the interviewee into storytelling. “Tell me about a time in your childhood when you got hurt or got in trouble,” was one such leading question (CMAC storygathering material). Open-ended questions that included “how” were encouraged. The trainers also helped the organization draft a release form, a critical document. Holtzberg stressed the necessity of signed releases from those interviewed. Without these, Swamp Gravy would not have the right to use the material gathered. The final document is not a statement of exclusive rights but grants use of the interview content (CMAC records).
The initial and ongoing process for the collection of stories is simple and almost always random. Volunteer interviewers grab tape recorders and head off to talk with members of the community whom they know personally and whom they think might have an interesting story to tell or whom others have suggested as possible interview candidates. Since one objective of the project is to preserve the past, senior citizens were targeted in the first interviews. They offered their remembrances of a communal rural past, but all kinds of stories have been collected and continue to be collected, anything from the 1800’s to current time.

To expedite that first round of interviewing, a local high school English teacher, Deborah Darley, drafted her students as mandatory participants. Members of her senior English class had a required assignment: to go out and interview one person and bring back a tape. Those students generated thirty tapes of oral histories, a wealth of material, just by talking to their grandparents. What an experience that had to be for both generations as evidenced by Jeff Dancer’s interview with his grandmother, Eleanor Dancer. He asks her about her school days and days on the job as a grocery store clerk, and as a way to end of the tape, he says with enthusiasm, “I love my grandma!” (“Audio Tapes,” CMAC Archives, 1991).

In addition to Darley’s initiative with teens, women and a few men, from all walks of life, housewives, store clerks, factory workers, teachers, and newspaper editors, gathered stories for the project. During that first round of storygathering, approximately two hundred people participated as storytellers and/or gatherers (Folk Tales 152-153). Over the years, countless more interviews have been conducted, but, according to the storygathering chairman, Sara Ann Keaton, the number of storygatherers shrinks rather than grows with the passage of time (“Personal Interview,” June, 2004). Interviewing is time-consuming work.

In fact, two women, Keaton herself and Charlotte Phillips, are responsible for the bulk of the interviews, gathering stories from which Carson is able to create scripts for community plays. Both of these women were at that very first training session, and they are faithful masters of the art. Not only do they continue to be the premier interviewers in the Swamp Gravy collection, they are also the trainers now, the ones who go out to other communities and teach people there about the storygathering process. Periodically, they
also hold meetings in Colquitt in an attempt to recruit new interviewers, but Keaton and Phillips are still the mainstays of the local storygathering process (“Personal Interviews,” August, 2005). While these two women are similar in their dedication and endurance, they are complete opposites in their subjects and techniques, and these differences provide Carson with the rich, varied material for her playwriting.

Keaton often targets larger-than-life figures, usually women, sometimes men, in the community who have maximum personality and maximum storytelling ability. For instance, one of Keaton’s first interview subjects was Juanita Geer, a woman married to a prominent attorney whose son became the lieutenant governor of the state and whose father built the Miller County Courthouse. The consummate storyteller, Mrs. Geer took great pride in the achievements of the men in her life. In a booming voice, Miss Juanita told one tale right after the other about the events in her life from childhood to courtship to motherhood, prompted by Keaton’s leading questions and lilting, encouraging laughter (“Audio Tapes,” Swamp Gravy, 1991). This interviewer’s success hinges on her obvious delight in the interview itself. From the tapes turned in by Keaton, Carson has created some of her most memorable scenes for Swamp Gravy, ones that are sometimes almost verbatim from the original storyteller (“Personal Interview, September, 1993). One such scene is “Secret Marriage,” from Keaton’s interview with Juanita Geer. It is included in two of Carson’s plays, The Blue Doctor and Special Edition. Another is “Ghosts” that first appeared in Swamp Gravy Sketches and is also part of The Blue Doctor.

Charlotte Phillips, another gifted storygatherer, goes after less flamboyant, less obvious subjects than Keaton pursues. The interviews submitted by Phillips are usually of members of her own family or quiet country folks. Coming from a farm family of twelve children, she has her own unlimited storehouse of tales about good parents, hard work, and childhood pranks. When she interviews outside of her family, she tends to choose people no one else would ever think about talking with, the ordinary, often poor folks, especially African Americans and native Americans, of the community. With her soft, soothing voice, she is, unlike Keaton, almost nonexistent on the interview tapes, but she manages to put the most reluctant storyteller at ease. She even covers the tape recorder with a lacy cloth so that the speaker is less self-conscious about being recorded. Her techniques, though very different from Sara Ann’s, are just as effective. The serious
stories about social issues and abuse that show up in Carson’s community plays frequently come from Phillips’ interviews, scenes such as “Covet” in The Gospel Truth, which focuses on child molestation by a deacon in the church (“Personal Interview,” September, 2004).

Carson herself also collects stories; she just does not call it that. She says what she does is listen to people talk. While her technique may be very informal, it still nets stories that she can then turn into scenes. Of course, there are many storygatherers in Swamp Gravy other than Keaton, Phillips, and Carson, who have contributed tapes and/or written/typed stories. The difference is in volume. Carson has interviewed only a few cast members and arts council members, and most volunteers turn in one or two tapes at the most. Keaton and Phillips, by contrast, are the consistent interviewers, the reliable ones, talking to hundreds of people over the years (“Personal Interviews,” August, 2005). For them, oral history collection is truly an on-going process, and storygathering is a passion. They continue to make the contacts, continue to spend their time doing in-depth interviews, and continue to bring in invaluable material for the playwright. Without these two key storygatherers, the Swamp Gravy oral history project could not boast of its large archive of oral histories, nor could Jo Carson write the particular community plays that she does.

And what sort of stories, what oral histories, do these two women and others bring back that Carson is able to use? The first wave of interviews resulted in a plethora of farm and school stories. “I remember when…” or “when I was a little girl/boy” was the way almost every single interview began (“Audio Tapes,” CMAC, 1991). With this first set of tapes, Carson had her work cut out for her. All were fairly general and very similar. Many focused on types of work associated with this south Georgia community, cotton picking, hog killing, peanut picking, mayhaw gathering, corn pulling, and cane grinding. These interviews tend to be on the task itself, the how-to explanation of cotton picking with few stories of personal reminiscences. Almost every interview conducted by the teens, students themselves, contained memories of school days. They heard descriptions of one-room schools, syrup bucket lunches, and wood-burning stoves. If there were any personal narratives, they were mostly about paddle-wielding teachers or principals and about walking miles to school, getting in trouble in the classroom or “playing hooky”
from school ("Audio Tapes," CMAC, 1991, and Swamp Gravy: Folk Tales of South Georgia, hereafter referred to as Tales). There were also a few ghost stories thrown into the mix.

This conglomerate of recollections was the source for Carson’s first play in Colquitt, Swamp Gravy Sketches and resulted in project’s first published book, Swamp Gravy: Folk Tales of South Georgia. Just as the title, Sketches, implies, each story was a separate vignette, which Carson pieced together loosely with a general theme of work. This initial script written by Carson sent Swamp Gravy on its way to becoming the Official Folklife Play of Georgia and to being an organization known for its oral-history based community performances.

The second storygathering attempt by Colquitt interviewers was more specific than the first one. It was an attempt to collect stories about the county’s medical history. While Chapter 13 of The History of Miller County Georgia, 1856-1980 has the same objective, it only contains a chronological list of county physicians and brief sections devoted to the establishments of Miller County Hospital, Miller County Nursing Home, Public Health, and the Jinks School of Nursing. There are no anecdotes about the doctors or personal accounts of illnesses. In contrast, the Swamp Gravy interviewers produced a preponderance of stories that revealed the personalities of the individual physicians and recounted episodes of sick or injured people. In a poor rural community such as Miller County, home remedies also abound, so many of these treatments were recorded as well. The strongest and longest interviews came from the local doctors or in the case of deceased doctors, their wives or relatives. Sara Ann Keaton was responsible for the material collected about well-known doctors such as Dr. Hinton Merritt, Mrs. Jane Merritt (wife of deceased Dr. James Merritt), and Mrs. Jo Webb (daughter of a doctor). Joy Jinks also went out to talk to Dr. T.W. Rentz, another practicing physician in Colquitt, and Mrs. Wattie Hays turned in a tape in which she interviewed her brother, Dr. William H. “Billy” Grimes, a Miller County native who had an obstetrical practice in Atlanta and who began his medical career in Colquitt as an apprentice of Dr. Walter Colquitt Hays. Along with stories about her father and others, Mrs. Webb also provided more stories featuring Dr. Hays. This particular physician painted his own throat with silver nitrate to cure an infection and because he had an allergic reaction, his skin had a
blue tinge. Mrs. Webb explains, “Whenever he was in the light, he was blue, and that’s most of the time he was blue. That’s how he came to be known as the Blue Doctor” (Tales 10-11). Dr. Hays’ reputation as the Blue Doctor fascinated Carson, and she names her second Swamp Gravy work after him. 

For this play, Charlotte Phillips in her usual way sought out the other; instead of doctors and nurses, she interviewed granny women, African Americans, and her own relatives to uncover an impressive number of cures and superstitions. Carson, who has for years been interested in healing, seized the opportunity to focus on the subject, contrasting Sara Ann’s learned doctors with Charlotte’s folk medicine practitioners. With The Blue Doctor, Carson structurally moves from the series of unrelated scenes in Sketches to a text unified by a spine story (the story of the doctor’s life woven throughout the play to provide plot) and connected to the other stories told. This first genuine community play by Carson follows this one doctor’s life, but he is actually a composite character whose stories are those of all the doctors from the interviews.

To counter the medical school mindset of the Blue Doctor, the playwright inserts calls and responses about folk medicine. A cast member asks how to cure a certain ailment, and another cast member responds with the remedy. These calls and responses are an interesting mix of herbal medicine and local superstitions. Edith McDuffie, an African American who was also interviewed and grew up without visits to the doctor, says, “Measles were treated with corn shuck tea. The same treatment was used for chicken pox. Mumps, which we seldom see now, was treated by rubbing the swollen jaw with sardine oil” (Tales 22). “I can remember when people were not able to go to the doctor when they got sick. There were remedies for almost everything,” she explains (Tales 21). For an example of popular superstitions, Phillips notes that the Bible verse, Ezekiel 16:6, was recited to stop bleeding, and sometimes spider webs were used. “Also, if you got wet in the first rain in May, you would not have a cold all summer,” she offers (Tales 18). To ease the pain of teething babies, a sock containing an egg with the child’s name on it was nailed over the door “the baby went through the most” (Tales 18). Carson incorporates these remedies and superstitions from oral histories into the script for The Blue Doctor. From these stories gathered by Sara Ann Keaton, Charlotte Phillips, and others, Carson comes up with The Blue Doctor, her first community play for Colquitt.
Her next Swamp Gravy work, *The Gospel Truth*, starts with another female interviewer. Cast member Jakie Draper, the daughter and granddaughter of two deceased preachers, decided to record the stories of their lives by talking to her mother and grandmother. From these in-depth interviews, representing the life of preachers in two different generations, Carson has the start-up material for a script about religion, south Georgia style. The playwright also listens to Mrs. Wattie Hays’ story of another preacher, one who always preached on the Ten Commandments and who always broke a plate during his sermon to illustrate the breaking of God’s commandments. To create the composite preacher in the *The Gospel Truth*, Carson then merges the stories about Jakie’s father being burned and the preacher’s wife stories of Jakie’s grandmother with Miss Wattie’s hellfire-and-damnation, plate-breaking preacher. The result is a play derived from oral histories that “make the truth more evident.” That is, Carson does not make up the stories for her community plays, but she does, however, frequently take one person’s story and superimposes it on that of another so that one character is the focus on stage. Carson’s collapsing or condensing of different people’s stories into one character on stage allows for dramatic action in the script and provides continuity of character for audience identification.

*The Gospel Truth* opens with a scene of fire, when the preacher as a child is seriously burned. The second scene has him awakening from a dream of fire and answering the call to preach while in the third scene, “No Other Gods,” he delivers his first sermon based on the Ten Commandments (4). After establishing these two themes of fire and the commandments, Carson writes the rest of *The Gospel Truth* to tell the preacher’s life story, to examine the nature of sin as interpreted in his Ten Commandments’ sermons, and then to illustrate these sins with other people’s stories. Both Keaton and Phillips have talked to people about their church memories. Stories are about brush arbor meetings, baptisms in the creek, choirs, church services, all night sings, revivals, Sunday School, and sin. From the miscellaneous oral histories collected by Keaton, Phillips, and other volunteers, Carson writes the companion scenes to offset those about the preacher’s life.

Like *The Blue Doctor* and *The Gospel Truth*, which came from interviews that targeted particular people, Carson’s fourth community play also began with a planned
strategy. **Sketches** was random stories of the past, but the next two plays had strong male characters in the central roles that Carson developed from a few strong interviews. Script advisers, an informal group composed of the storygathering chairman, some arts council officers, and cast members, talked to Carson and expressed their desire for a play about a woman (Keaton, “Personal Interview,” September, 1995). In a follow-up meeting of storygatherers with about ten people present, a general theme of strong southern women was decided upon for the next play. Names of those who should be interviewed were listed, with different women volunteering to be responsible for the interviews.

One of the suggested subjects was Ella Sheffield, an enterprising woman who, along with her husband, amassed a fortune in the 1930’s through farming the land and ginning cotton. Gayle Grimsley mentioned several African American females from the 1950’s and 1960’s who had made a difference in the lives of many. Another idea was the story of Zula B. Toole, the first woman newspaper editor in the state of Georgia and maybe even in the nation. She founded the local newspaper, the *Miller County Liberal* in 1898, so her story would stretch the farthest back in county history. Since Miss Zula died in the 1940’s, the interview contacts would have to be her daughter and son-in-law, Willie and Bert Priest, and her grandson, Terry Toole, the current owner of the family newspaper. Miss Zula’s oldest daughter and son-in-law, Ona Zula and Roy Jones, and Terry Toole’s mother, Mrs. Annie Lou Toole, had written accounts about life with Miss Zula, which were also submitted to Carson.

As sometimes happens, the play envisioned initially by the committee can be quite different from Carson’s final script. This play was supposed to be about several strong women, but certain people failed to follow through with the interviews by the submission deadline, and Carson had to settle for the available transcripts. One of the playwright’s frequent laments in her work with oral histories collected by local people is, “The stories just weren’t there,” and that is how she felt as she started on this Swamp Gravy play (“Personal Interview, July, 1995). From the scarce material that came in, the pioneer editor’s story stood out to Carson. She then took action herself, supplementing the existing information about the editor by hitting the newspaper stacks. The playwright camped out at the Miller County Courthouse, pouring over back issues of Miss Zula’s paper. To write *Special Edition*, Carson relied on oral histories, both taped interviews and
written memoirs from the editor’s relatives, and on newspaper items written by the editor herself. With this script, the playwright adheres to the facts in her spine on Miss Zula’s life; all of the events and details are totally accurate. For once, Carson does not have to worry about letting “the truth stand in the way of a good story.” The good story this time is the truth.

Garnered from a variety of interviews and written sources, Special Edition encapsulates the life of the journalist and also incorporates stories of other strong women, presented in the play as newspaper articles from Miss Zula’s paper. Scenes include “Fun,” one woman’s chronicle of farm life; “Secret Marriage,” Miss Juanita Geer’s extended tale of her elopement; and “Brown Dress,” Mrs. Edith McDuffie’s confession of spousal homicide. Carson had to go back to the stories collected in that first wave of Swamp Gravy interviews to write some of the new scenes and recycled “Fun” and “Secret Marriage” from The Blue Doctor. Carson also did some casual interviewing herself and talked to cast member, Gayle Grimsley. From that conversation, she created a scene entitled “Education,” a much more contemporary story of learning the hard way and growing up in the segregated South. While storygathering for this play did not result in the needed material, Carson more than compensates for the shortage, using previously recorded oral histories, reviving old scenes, and finding stories in newspapers and through her own interviews. Special Edition may not be the play originally envisioned by either her or the committee members, yet it does turn out to be a factual, fascinating look at some of the women of Miller County.

Just as a new Swamp Gravy play opens, Carson and the committee members are already considering the theme for the next one. For the fourth community play, someone suggested law and order as the general theme, and the volunteers began the process of storygathering. One interviewer chose to talk to a former sheriff’s daughter, Merle Merritt. Her father served as sheriff for over thirty years was considered by many to be “the law” in Miller County. Mrs. Merritt, the designated family historian, seemed to be the logical interview choice. She told stories of girlhood, living at the jail with her family and added personal details about Sheriff Tabb, including his fondness of hunting, his love for bird dogs, and his generosity to the less fortunate. It was a most complimentary portrait, not at all in sync with the rumored stories that had always circulated around the
community about the sheriff’s election fraud, payoffs for illegal liquor sales, and ruthless, inequitable enforcement of the law. Nonetheless, Mrs. Merritt’s reminiscences about Sheriff Tabb were submitted to Carson.

Sara Ann Keaton took an opposite angle to the theme of law and order as she sought out information about legendary criminals. She interviewed family members and acquaintances of the Anglin brothers, two Miller County boys turned bank robbers whose claim to fame is that they escaped from the inescapable prison, Alcatraz. She also read the book written about these two and researched old newspapers for details of their crimes and trials.

From several different interviews by Charlotte Phillips came stories about making moonshine and breaking out of jail. Jo Carson, herself, also conducted informal interviews, or as she says, “listened to people’s stories” (“Personal Interview,” November, 1996). Sherry Grow Flynn, Swamp Gravy’s assistant director at the time, told Carson about her stepmother who was the only female school superintendent in Miller County’s history. The playwright heard how this woman stood defiant against the Ku Klux Klan in order to provide separate but equal facilities for the 1940’s segregated schools.

Carson then linked these very disparate oral histories into The Rock and the Hard Place, a community play which focuses on both the law and education. To these new stories collected, Jo adds a reprise from Special Edition, the story of Swamp Gravy cast member, Gayle Grimsley, whose life serves as an obvious connection between the two themes as she moves from bar room brawls and incarceration to a life of community service. Structurally, The Rock and the Hard Place is Carson’s most complicated play for Swamp Gravy as the usual single spine splinters off in four directions. The playwright develops four storylines: the Anglin brothers researched by Keaton, moonshine women interviewed by Phillips, the superintendent derived from Flynn, and Gayle Grimsley expanded by Carson. These four stories are presented in three segments each. Also tossed in is a scene about the sheriff using children as deputies to round up gamblers on the creek bank, which came from the Merle Merritt interview. Several other crime stories from different sources serve as Carson’s basis for short scenes related to the four main story lines.
While *Special Edition* includes newspaper accounts and stories substantiated by facts and written documents, the law and order scenes in this play are more for comic relief, based on one daughter’s far-from-objective look at a law enforcer, legends of harmless law-breakers, and funny stories about going to jail. The education scenes, however, are serious ones taken from the personal narratives of Grimsley and the school superintendent. With such a broad base, *The Rock and the Hard Place* is Carson’s most ambitious work for Swamp Gravy and certainly contains more individual stories than any other play. Rather than not enough information as was the case for *Special Edition*, Carson seems to try to include too many stories in *The Rock and the Hard Place*. It is hard to keep them straight in the rapid swirl of different plot lines. Perhaps it would have been wiser for her to concentrate on only the law and order theme and save education for another whole play; Carson did not.

For the next season, arts council executives, not completely satisfied with the last production, wanted a breather from mounting a new show and decided to run *The Blue Doctor* again (Karen Kimbrel, “Personal Interview, June, 1996). Carson was asked to edit the original script, and she called for oral histories about healing to give the play another dimension. Volunteers went off to gather stories. Some recorded more medical stories; Mary Rentz, a registered nurse/lab technician, and Ann Addison, the county health nurse, were two examples of different medical personnel interviewed. Sara Ann Keaton talked to Nan Grow, a minister who conducts healing services, and Charlotte Phillips questioned relatives and acquaintances about overcoming illnesses, healing through prayer, and coping with deaths. From other Swamp Gravy cast and crew members came Jean Watson’s contemporary story, “Born Blind,” about her cornea transplants from the eyes of dead children and Karen Kimbrel’s two stories about personal healing experiences, one of her father’s grief over his dead son and the other about her back injury. Carson also tucks in her own story about healing, “Moped”; it is a scene where a young boy heals her injured knee by laying on hands. In contrast to these inspiring stories, Joy Jinks offers Sarene Coleman’s oral history of physical healing and psychological scarring. This woman’s grim remembrance is of having to climb a tree to escape from her vengeful stepmother, only to have the woman set the tree on fire with Sarene in it.
Carson combines these new stories with the prior medical cases and the doctor’s life stories from The Blue Doctor. Along with the Blue Doctor, there are two new recurring characters, a reporter and a healer, in the play now called Good Medicine. The Blue Doctor dies at the end of Act One, and in this play all of the newly collected stories show up in Act Two with the exception of “Born Blind,” which comes near the end of Act One as a story about the marvels of modern medicine.

The second act focuses entirely on alternative forms of healing. The Nan Grow interview serves as the starting point for the healer, a character who is the antithesis of the Blue Doctor. In both acts of Good Medicine, it is the objective reporter’s assignment to examine all aspects of healing as he interviews the Blue Doctor and watches him at work, asks for herbal cures in scenes similar to the calls and responses from The Blue Doctor, and casts doubt on faith healing with skeptical questions. This character is the history maker, the recorder of information, always armed with a pen and a clipboard. In a way, as Carson examines ways of healing, she also challenges ways of knowing. The words of the healer character and accounts of being healed by prayer or the laying on hands contrast sharply with the doctor’s monologues about wonder drugs and vaccines. In looking at healing as distinct from curing, Carson sets up a binary opposition in her two acts much like Minh-ha’s history versus story. In Good Medicine by turning its predecessor, The Blue Doctor into just the opening act, the playwright makes it clear that medical science is not the final word. She shows an altogether different focus in her expansion of The Blue Doctor, and the continuous storygathering process in Swamp Gravy gives Carson this opportunity to approach the same topic and a former work in a fresh way.

Lost and Found, the last play Jo Carson wrote for Swamp Gravy, never made it to the stage. The play committee members had a general working theme of brothers and sisters to highlight family relationships. Several stories were submitted from interviewers, many coming from Phillips’ eleven siblings, but Carson chose to tell only one story in the first act. She focuses on the oral histories of Harvey Hammock and Barbara Blankenship, a brother and sister separated at her birth by adoption and then reunited twenty-nine years later through his efforts to find his baby sister. It is a compelling story, recorded during one three-hour interview of both subjects and resulting in a thirty-five-page transcript.
Certainly the story could have been a play in itself. For Act Two of *Lost and Found*, Carson reworks the story of the Anglin brothers, using additional information provided by Keaton. The connection between Act One and Act Two is tenuous at best, united mostly by the play’s title.

Because the play is about only two stories, cast members were reluctant to accept it. At the read-through, the way any new play is introduced to the cast, negative comments began. Cast members felt Carson’s offering was not typical of Swamp Gravy; many complained about the lack of roles, and the group voted that night to reject the new work (Karen Kimbrel, “Personal Interview,” January, 1997). Arts council officers then decided to remount Carson’s *The Gospel Truth* instead. Consequently, *Lost and Found* was never staged. At that point with some ill will on both sides, Carson left the project in Colquitt but not the genre.

In other places she continues to use her talent for turning oral histories, ordinary people’s stories, into community plays. When questioned about her reason for this type of work, she remarked partially in jest, “Writing plays is what I do for me. Writing oral history plays are what I do for money. But they are important and can be life-changing. Besides it beats working in a grocery store” (“Email Interview,” March 12, 2005). In her book, *Spider Speculations*, Carson shows a more serious side to her thoughts about community performance. She says her community plays are a form of healing, hence the description of her work as “life-changing.” Minh-ha sees “the story as a cure and a protection” that “is at once musical, historical, poetical, ethical, educational, magical, and religious” and that can bring about “reconciliation” (140). “The principle of healing rests on ‘reconciliation,’ hence the necessity for the family and/or the community to cooperate, partake in, and witness the recovery, de-possession, regeneration of the sick” (Mihn-ha 140). Carson substitutes redemption for it “reconciliation,” but her basic philosophy is the same. By helping a community tell its stories, both good and bad, Carson promotes the healing and health of those in the community, in the cast, and in the audience.

While the playwright travels to other places to continue her work in community performance projects, the storygathering and storytelling in Colquitt also continue due largely to such women as Sara Ann Keaton and Charlotte Phillips, who share Carson’s belief in the power of the story. True to Minh-ha’s ideas, they see storytelling as the
common link between women in every culture as “every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future” (122). Linda Tate calls it “talking a new talk” to “validate the old” and says, “Many voices are mingled in my mouth: those of southern women writers and of their characters; those of my mother and grandmothers; and finally my own. The matrix and the voice, the womb and the loom, become one, and in weaving the tales of my many southern women, I come to know and to say my own” (208). The women of Colquitt have come to know their voice in their community. Storytelling is vital to the women in the Swamp Gravy project and to its former playwright, Jo Carson. With the gathering of oral histories by the women of Colquitt and through the writings of Carson and other playwrights, Swamp Gravy gives a voice on stage to its south Georgia culture and to the reconciling, redemptive stories of community.

Creating community plays for the stage, though, is only one purpose of Swamp Gravy’s oral history project. The women there have a second agenda to preserve those stories for future generations. The first Swamp Gravy book was “dedicated to our ancestors and our future generations, both of whom we have the obligation to remember.” While Carson took the original stories and wrote scripts, certainly a tribute in itself to the storytellers, the women in Swamp Gravy make sure the oral histories are also recorded on audio tape and transcribed in the exact words of the speaker. When tapes are turned in, copies are made, one for the Swamp Gravy archives and one for the local library. Each tape is then transcribed. In addition to interviewing, both Keaton and Phillips make copies of tapes and often do the transcribing for the interviews they conduct. Other tapes submitted, however, go to professional typists with Elizabeth McDonald, a Colquitt native now living in Cuthbert, Georgia, as one of the main transcribers. A legal secretary with experience in typing trial transcripts, she strives for exactness and produces documents that retain all of the original language. These transcriptions are copied with one going to the playwright and the other being retained by Swamp Gravy. Because of her poor hearing, Carson rarely requests a copy of the tape, but she did occasionally. She liked to hear the cadence, the timbre in the voice of some storytellers. Her usual method of writing, though, is to read the oral histories sent to her rather than to listen to them.

All of the oral histories are saved, archived by the arts council, and then ultimately edited for book publication. Like the story collecting, play writing, and transcribing, the
publishing started as the handiwork of women. Ferrell Keaton was the only male member on the book committee, which included, in addition to others, four permanent members: the editor, Debra Jones; Swamp Gravy executive director, Karen Kimbrel; storygathering chairperson, Sara Ann Keaton; and veteran storygatherer, Charlotte Phillips. Swamp Gravy has four volumes in print and has reprinted the sold-out first volume, Swamp Gravy: Folk Tales of South Georgia. The other three titles are Swamp Gravy, Volume Two: The Gospel Truth; Swamp Gravy, Volume Three: Good Medicine; and Swamp Gravy, Volume Four: Claiming Kin. The plays come first, and the books lag behind, published usually the next year or later. The only exception to this schedule was Claiming Kin, which came out the same night as the play featuring stories in the book. For the first time, those attending the play could buy a book, go home, and read the stories in the words of the original storytellers and compare the printed stories to what they had seen on stage. As a further attempt at archiving, each time a new book comes out, a copy is donated to the public library for patron use.

Minh-ha observes, “The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand,” and the women of Swamp Gravy add another dimension to this archiving with their insistence on both recorded voices and typed transcriptions (121). With this further step of archiving, those involved in the project guarantee that the stories will be there for anyone who wants to listen or to read. The storyteller lives on beyond the body with these permanent records, and theirs is no longer just a personal story to be passed on to family members but now a community story available to all people. With its accumulation of oral histories and its desire to preserve and publish these oral histories, Swamp Gravy is like many other projects around the world. Collections of oral histories and stories abound. Colquitt is far-sighted in trying achieve both objectives, to not only maintain an oral history library but to also produce community plays from the stories gathered and saved. Carson made an invaluable contribution to this process, demonstrating that those stories could become stage scripts. Through her creative writing for Swamp Gravy, Carson changed Colquitt’s oral histories, those stories of ordinary people in the community, from history, Trin Minh-ha’s “accumulation and facts,” to literature and the performing arts.
CHAPTER THREE
A HELPING OF FOLKLIFE PLAY

Building on a base of her former writing and a community’s oral history gatherings, Jo Carson creates the scripts for Swamp Gravy, the “Official Folklife Play of Georgia.” Those involved in the project take great pride in this state-level recognition, an honor that originated with Bainbridge native, Representative Cathy Cox. She attended a performance in 1994, and was so moved by the experience that she introduced a bill in the Georgia General Assembly to have Swamp Gravy named Georgia’s folklife play. Legislators then voted to grant this distinction (“The Millennium and Beyond Program”30). The designation, of course, leads to the obvious question: what exactly does it mean for Carson’s Swamp Gravy work to be called a folklife play? Is it the same thing as a folk play, or is it a folk drama? Scholarly attempts to differentiate all of these terms abound. To review the history of the academic debate over what constitutes folklife, a folk play, and folk drama will serve to situate Swamp Gravy in this ongoing discussion. More importantly, it will also provide a frame with which to define Carson’s work as Georgia’s “Official Folklife Play” and to examine the significance of folklife elements in her Swamp Gravy scripts.

First, what exactly is “folk”? That word alone has a variety of connotations. In his 1939 anthology, American Folk Plays, Frederick Koch talks about “the so-called common people, generally thought of as the ‘folk,’” and he equates the term with the “less sophisticated people living simple lives not seriously affected by the present-day, complex social order”(xv-xvi). Folk for others is synonymous with the peasantry. Almost fifty years after Koch, Elliott Oring gives a more generalized definition and refers to “folk” as “any group based on any factor (rather than a specific group formed on the basis of select factors)” (1). Another thirteen years later, Steve Tillis says, “A folk is any group of people, however few or many, who share at least one common factor, such as family bond, occupation, ethnicity, nationality, or language, and who as a result also share a corpus of performance that engenders and/or enhances a sense of communal identity” (63-64). Tillis offers a slightly greater degree of specificity as he links the performances of “the folk” as a way to establish “communal identity.” According to all three, Koch,
Oring, and Tillis, “folk” can be essentially any group of people, not just unsophisticated peasants, linked in any way, but Tillis seems to equate the folk specifically with community, making his definition the closest to the folk represented in the “Official Folklife Play of Georgia,” Swamp Gravy.

Although there is not a great deal of clarity concerning “folk,” the word nevertheless becomes part of the term, “folklife,” which has specific distinctions to scholars. Offering a general definition for folklife, Simon Bronner explains that “folklife arose to describe the traditional way of life shared by peasant and ethnic communities” (121). The New Georgia Encyclopedia web site is a current source of definition. Established in February, 2004, by the Georgia Humanities Council, this site explains “folklife” as a term “coined by folklorists in the 1960s to reflect the addition of material culture (art and craft, architecture, food) to the oral, musical, and customary traditions previously studied as folklore, and to suggest the integration of all these expressive forms into people’s lives” (www.georgiaencyclopedia.org 1-2).

Ironically, when the New Georgia Encyclopedia catalogues the distinct folklife areas of Georgia, southwest Georgia, home of “Georgia’s Official Folklife Play,” is not even one of them. Instead it notes, “The ethnic, occupational, and locale-based diversity of Georgia folklife can be compared to a multi-patterned patchwork quilt, with fishing and Geechee traditions on the coast, swamp lore in the Okefenokee, a rich pottery and blues heritage in the Piedmont, and ballad singing, fiddling, and banjo-picking in the mountains” (1). There is not one word about any sort of folklife to be found in the southwest corner of the state, Swamp Gravy’s specific geographic location. While the project may call itself, Swamp Gravy, it makes no claim to represent the Okefenokee Swamp, nor does it have any connections to Geechee coastal customs, Piedmont pottery, or mountain music as noted in the New Georgia Encyclopedia.

Instead, in her Swamp Gravy scripts, Carson tries to capture the essence of agrarian southwest Georgia and its rural way of life. Cathy Cox grew up only twenty-one miles south of Colquitt, and her idea of “folk,” or the common people, would probably be the farmers that comprise the economic and social base of her hometown of Bainbridge and its neighbor, Colquitt. Given her background, Cox may have equated what she saw on the Swamp Gravy stage with her own ideas of “ethnic, occupational, and locale-based”
folklore, hence her actions to secure the title, “Official Folklife Play of Georgia,” for the project’s play. Also from a practical standpoint, as a state legislator representing a congressional district, Cox may have offered her bill to honor Swamp Gravy as a way to please her Colquitt constituents but to also draw legislative attention to her region of the state. Whatever her personal or political motivations, Swamp Gravy’s distinction as a folklife play still stands.

To further contextualize this distinction, it is helpful to consider Swamp Gravy in relation to ongoing discussions of the folk play and folk drama. The *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* terms folk plays “rough and ready dramatic entertainments given at village festivals by the villagers themselves…derived, with minimum of literary intervention, from the dramatic tendencies inherent in primitive folk festivals” with “the central theme of death and resurrection” (328). Frederick Koch in his introduction to *American Folk Plays* traces the origin of this genre from the Greeks to the Middle Ages and morality plays (vii). In fact, the medieval mumming play is most frequently named by Koch and others as one of the earliest examples of the folk play, and it fits the characteristics enumerated by the *Oxford Companion*. J.A. Cuddon says the mumming play is “a primitive form of folk drama associated with funeral rites and seasonal fertility rites, especially the spring festival” (559). He elaborates on the form:

> Though the ‘texts’ stem from oral tradition (q.v.) there is a good deal of uniformity in the mumming play, which is performed by Mummers. The main characters are St. (or Sir) George, a Turkish knight, a doctor, a fool in cap and bells, and a devil (usually Beelzebub). Sometimes there is a Father Christmas and Jack Finney, or Johnny Jack the sweeper. The plot … and action are very simple: St. George introduces himself as a gallant Christian knight and is challenged by the Turk. They duel and one of them (usually St. George) is killed. The Doctor then appears and delivers a boastful litany of the ailments he can cure. He finally revives the dead man. There follows a collection of money (often by the devil). (559)

From those specific beginnings as a mumming play, a folk play is now more generally described as a sort of ritual performed by the peasantry, acting out a fixed performance, requiring little or no script, for an audience totally familiar with the story, and it is usually not considered the same as a folk drama (Burson 316).
For some writers the terms, folk play and folk drama, are different concepts, but for others the terms seem almost interchangeable. In a 1968 essay, Roger D. Abrahams looks at folk drama as a folklore form that is not “purely literary” but one that should be considered “as a behavioral complex” (149). Over a decade later, Thomas A. Green observes that “the folk play shares important qualities with other forms of folklore,” and then refers to folk drama as more restrictive. “Folk drama is a scripted performance which incorporates mimesis and role-distribution among two or more players and which adheres to the traditional aesthetic and communicative models of the performing community,” he explains, aligning Carson’s Swamp Gravy plays much closer to his definition of folk drama than to the folk play (“Introduction”). Green’s contemporary, Anne C. Burson provides a concise summary of the naming dilemma in her essay, “Model and Text in Folk Drama.” Her “aim is to examine our current definitions of folk drama and to suggest a new way of conceptualizing the genre” (305). Using mumming plays and medical skits for comparison, she calls for a “model-oriented conception of folk drama” (315). For Burson, who says the study of folk drama is deemed the “academic backwater devoted to the investigation of the quaint and curious,” the determining factor between a folk play and folk drama is “exact reproduction” (309). A folk play is the same performance year after year and generation after generation while the folk drama “is generally seen as an event in which the same text is repeated, though with variations, over time” (307).

In a more recent book (1999), Rethinking Folk Drama, Steve Tillis shares Burson’s assessment of folk drama as a neglected field and attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of folk play versus folk drama. He describes The Cambridge Guide to the Theatre’s comments on the subject as “somewhat less parochial” than that of The Oxford Companion, which are, according to him, “mostly a condescending, bucolic fantasy” (13). Tillis says,

No folklorist in the past thirty years or more would take seriously The Oxford Companion’s ideas about either folk drama in general or the Mummers’ Play in particular, but these ideas have had a disturbingly long half-life outside of folkloristics proper. We have here a good example of the deleterious effect that definitions can have: by this definition, the concept of folk drama applies only to
survivals among country folk of primitive dramatic ‘tendencies’ that are derived, it is implied, from primitive religion and that are essentially irrelevant to contemporary life. Not only is this conception of folk drama exceedingly narrow, it is palpably dismissive: folk drama is a bit of history that has more or less died out. To apply the concept of folk drama, as construed by The Oxford Companion, to a particular form of performance is of antiquarian interest only: the concept is less an analytical tool than a grave-digger’s shovel. (13)

Tillis, however, sees folk drama as anything but dead and strives to show its current relevance. In his introduction, he summarizes the extensive academic discussion on the subject and concludes with the Nordic Institute of Folklore’s (NIF) definition of folk drama as “a dramatic action with fixed roles presented before a public by non-professional persons in their own social surroundings” (25). His book then attempts to expand the definition of folk drama beyond its European roots and sets out to make “the case for folk drama as a matter of global significance” (27). While he acknowledges both folk play and folk drama as recognized forms discussed by scholars, he never uses the term “folklife play,” the Georgia General Assembly’s chosen term for Swamp Gravy.

Perhaps Jo Carson’s Swamp Gravy plays were simply misnamed and are really variations of Tillis’ folk drama. Several authorities refer to folk drama performances as “scripted,” which Swamp Gravy certainly is, thanks to Carson. Also the limitation of “fixed roles” could be applied to her plays (Tillis 24). In the strictest sense of “fixed roles,” folk dramas repeat the same story with the same characters over the course of time. In Swamp Gravy’s case, the same characters remain unchanged for a year’s performance run and may reappear in other future productions, but they are not consistently present year after year like characters in most folk dramas. Furthermore, the plays of the project may tenuously trace their origin back to the mumming plays of Europe as suggested for all of folk drama. While the European link is conceivable, it is strained at best. There is a much more direct connection between Swamp Gravy and the folk play as it first appears in early twentieth century America. Frederick Koch with his work in North Dakota and North Carolina is a predecessor to Swamp Gravy.

His Carolina Playmakers were the first in America to use the term, folk play, or at least they were the first to document the term when the phrase appeared on the playbill of
the group’s premier performance at Chapel Hill in March 1919. However, based on the delineation of terms by scholars, what The Carolina Playmakers created seems to be a folk drama and not a folk play at all. As Charles Zug notes, “There are a number of similarities between Koch’s concept and the traditional folk play, and a brief comparison between these two forms suggests that Koch may have borrowed some of his ideas and techniques from the latter” but adds that “such a comparison also reveals that Koch should never have borrowed the term, ‘folk play’ for his own concept of drama” (283-284). Zug concludes that “Koch could have been wiser to have labeled his particular concept ‘regional drama’” (286).

Whether his work is closer to folk drama or the folk play, Koch saw himself as a true pioneer, decided on the term folk play, and worked to establish his own definition. According to his guidelines, the play has a distinct subject matter, a specific author, and a written text. Also the “folk play is communally rewritten by a group of his peers” and “is presented in a experimental folk theater in which the audience has the opportunity to criticize and suggest further revision” (Zug 283). The folk plays of The Carolina Playmakers actually began as academic exercises composed and performed by students in Koch’s playwriting courses at the University of North Carolina. He explains their work in the following way:

The Carolina Folk-Plays suggest the beginnings of a new native theatre. They are pioneer plays of North Carolina life. The stories and characters are drawn by the writers from their observation of the lives of their own people. They are wholly native – simple plays of the locality, of common experience and of common interest….They were written by sons and daughters of Carolina, at Chapel Hill, the seat of the state university” (Carolina Folk Plays, hereafter designated CFP, xii).

While the term, “folk play,” is identified with his work in North Carolina, Koch actually began his work in this field in North Dakota with what he refers to as his 1906 “barn-storming” tour (CFP xii). His students there presented standard productions of such well known plays as Sheridan’s The Rivals and Goldsmith’s She Stoops to Conquer, before The Dakota Playmakers became “pledged to the production of native plays of their prairie country” (CFP xiii). Their offerings fell into two broad categories: “the pageant, a distinctly communal form enlisting actively all the people; and the folk-play, an intimate
portrayal of the life and character of the people of the plains (CFP xiii).

The pageant, which Koch boasts is “a new form of creative literary work” was “designed and written entirely – dialogue, poetry, and music – by a group of these amateur Playmakers in collaboration” and “required a theatre in the open” (CFP xiii-xiv). One of their pageant venues, Bankside Theatre, was an open air theatre that used a stream to separate the stage from the amphitheater, and Koch said its creation was “of permanent value in the history of the out-door stage” (CFP xiv). He notes, “At the same time The Playmakers at the university were busy writing for their improvised ‘Play-Stage’ a variety of simple folk-plays portraying scenes of ranch and farm life, adventures of frontier settlers, incidents of the cowboy trails” (CFP xiv). An example of the prairie plays is Barley Beards that tells the story of a riot during wheat harvesting time in North Dakota. Its author experienced the event, wrote the script, created the scenery, and also acted in his own play (CFP xv). Other one-act play titles include Back on the Old Farm, Dakota Dick, Me an’ Bill, and For the Colleen and are described by Koch as “simple plays, sometimes crude, but always near to the good, strong, wind-swept soil” (CFP xv-xvi). Koch’s North Dakota achievements are the foundation for both the folk play and outdoor pageant popularized in North Carolina and serve as a forerunner for Carson’s folklife plays.

While his North Dakota students had a dual focus of outdoor dramas and indoor one-act folk plays, the Carolina Playmakers concentrated initially on the folk play. This group started out as a loose federation, “a society of amateurs in cooperative folk-arts” in which “anyone who did anything toward the making of a play was counted a Playmaker” (CFP xviii). As in North Dakota, the North Carolinians began with stories of their state. The initial program consisted of What Will Barbara Say? a romance of Chapel Hill by Minnie Shepherd Sparrow who essayed the leading part; The Return of Buck Gavin, a tragedy of a mountain outlaw, by Thomas C. Wolfe, of Asheville, who made his debut as a player in the title role of this his first play; and When Witches Ride, a play of North Carolina folk-superstition drawn largely by the young author, Elizabeth A. Lay, from her own experiences while teaching in a country school in Northampton County (CFP xviii).

These first productions in 1918 reveal Koch’s mandate in regard to subject matter. Zug
says, “It appears that he chose the adjective, ‘folk,’ in order to emphasize the proper content for his folk plays: folktale, folksong, superstition, custom, and folk dialect” (286). Thomas Wolfe, one of the young playwrights mentored by Koch who, of course, becomes a nationally recognized novelist with his Look Homeward, Angel, begins his literary career with the folk play, “The Return of Buck Gavin.” His first published work is a reflection of Koch’s influence. When talking about his choice of topic, Wolfe explains, “It is the fallacy of the young writer to picture the dramatic as unusual and remote…. The dramatic is not unusual. It is happening daily in our lives” (Carolina Folk Comedies, hereafter designated as CFC, 8). Archibald Henderson in the foreword to Carolina Folk Comedies says it was Koch, “intent upon cultivating locality as a theme of dramatic interest, inspiring reflective study of the native people in their primitive aspects as folk, and utilizing to the greatest advantage the colloquialism,” who guided Wolfe and his fellow Carolina Playmakers to write plays about the people of their home state (CFC xxix).

In addition to Wolfe, Koch had other students who went on to receive national acclaim represented in his first published volume of folk plays. The most famous of these was playwright Paul Green. This writer lamented that from “from its beginning, three hundred years ago, until the present [1928], North Carolina has made no lasting contribution to the art of the world, and what is said of this state can be said of most of our Southern states,” but he, Wolfe, and others influenced by Koch would change the state’s literary reputation forever and glorify its folk heritage (CFP xxx).

One scholar calls Green “the one Playmaker who consistently used folklore in his plays as the basis for social comment” (Sanders 65). Green’s play, “The Last of the Lowries: A Play of the Croatan Outlaws of Robeson County, North Carolina” tells the story of the tribe’s extinction at the hand’s of the white man, and this story is a recurring theme in his later works. After writing for over twenty years, the native North Carolinian expressed his own thoughts about the nature of folk plays and his choice of subject matter:

Most of the plays I have written can be designated as folk plays, and I know this seems a narrow boundary. Perhaps it is, but since the ‘folk’ are the people who seem to matter most to me, I have little interest in trying to deal with others who are more
foreign and therefore less real me … Those who live as it were with their feet in the earth and their head bare to the storms … These develop a wisdom of living which seems to me more real and beautiful than those who develop their values and ambitions from rubbing shoulders in a crowded city. (Sanders 66)

It is this insistence on the local and specifically on the rural that links both Koch and his student, Paul Green, to Jo Carson and her writing for Swamp Gravy. Although the textual base for her Swamp Gravy plays is called oral history, Colquitt’s stories of the past, the stories of real people, seem to be very close to those of the “folk” as defined by Koch and Green. One obvious contrast between the plays of The Carolina Playmakers and Swamp Gravy productions is the structure, one-act folk tales by North Carolina and two-act folklife plays in Georgia. The Carolina Playmakers did present several one-act plays as separate entities during the same performance while Carson’s scripts divide into two acts with both acts containing multiple stories, related and intertwined. The relationships between the playwrights and the cast also differ in these two cases. The writers for The Carolina Playmakers were University of North Carolina students under the guidance of faculty member, Koch, while Carson is a hired professional writing for a community of which she is not a native. In his essay, “Folk Drama Defined,” Green talks about the writer, performers, and audience for his work, saying, “Both the dramatist and the actors who create the folk play may in no sense be of ‘the folk,’ and their piece may never be seen or heard of by the type of people it portrays, and yet it is folk drama in its material as such” (Sanders 66). His early work with The Carolina Playmakers confirms these ideas as the cast members were drama school students and the plays were presented on campus in “The Playmakers Theatre,” described by Koch as “the first in America to be dedicated to a native drama of its own,” and were far removed from the “folk” represented in the plays (CFC xiv). Carson’s professionally written plays are performed by amateurs, too, not drama students, but members of the community from which the stories originated, and are presented in Cotton Hall, a theater created for Swamp Gravy productions. Just as Green admits his audience is probably not ‘the folk,’ Carson’s plays about the people of Colquitt, performed by the people of that community, are not necessarily being viewed by those in the community.

While Swamp Gravy certainly has similarities to the folk play concepts of Koch
and the seminal play writing of Green with the Carolina Playmakers, it has even more in common with the outdoor dramas introduced by Koch in North Dakota and later transplanted in North Carolina. As he talks about the thirteen years of progress in North Carolina, where he “witnessed a remarkable renaissance in the drama,” Koch refers to Forest Theatre, so it is evident his students were working on both folk plays and outdoor dramas just as they did in North Dakota (CFC xiii). His former student, Green, and another University of North Carolina graduate, Kermit Hunter, are the ones who take Koch’s idea for an outdoor drama and turn it into a North Carolina institution. Today’s closest equivalent to Carson’s folklife plays for Swamp Gravy in Georgia may well be the two long-running outdoor dramas, The Lost Colony by Paul Green and Unto These Hills by Kermit Hunter. All three of these creations have the stories of people as their starting point; they also each have important site-specific performance spaces, that is, theaters created especially for the plays; they express similar objectives, the use of drama to feature a particular heritage and to benefit the economy of the geographic location; and finally they have all enjoyed longevity as play productions.

In fact, according to some sources, Green’s The Lost Colony is the longest running outdoor drama in America with its debut on July 4, 1937, at Waterside Theatre on Roanoke Island, North Carolina. The author’s career began twenty years earlier when a play of his was part of the 1917 commencement program at the college. After a tour of duty in World War I, Green returned to Chapel Hill and wrote The Last of the Lowries as already noted. The college produced this folk play about Native Americans in the Cape Fear River region where the playwright grew up. Green then went on to enjoy fame for his plays on Broadway and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1927 for In Abraham’s Bosom, but he is probably best known for his outdoor drama written ten years later.

Although some scholars trace The Lost Colony back to Green’s first published drama about the Croatans, the playwright attributes his writing The Lost Colony to a suggestion by his wife, Elizabeth. Through her job with the Bureau of Community Drama, she learned of a project by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to produce and film a reenactment of the first English colonies in America. She encouraged Green to assist with the project at the Fort Raleigh site on Roanoke Island. He did and described the site as “desolate of desolates” (18). Obviously, though, the
place stayed in his mind; the ultimate result of that visit is *The Lost Colony*, in which “Paul Green has reinvented an old art form as a new and vital way for Americans to celebrate their heritage, to find meaning in their past for their life in the present” (Parker 18).

Like the academic uncertainty over the terms, folk play, folk drama, and folklife play, *The Lost Colony* was hard to classify when it was first produced and remains so. To illustrate the dilemma over its genre, a mock interview in a 1999 souvenir program has a reporter asking the playwright to categorize his work. The journalist, who wants just a one-word descriptor, tries out pageant, historical drama, historical fiction, folk play, folk drama, epic drama before hitting upon the term, “symphonic drama” (11). The reporter finally decides, “Symphonic drama is a pageant, a folk drama, an epic drama, an historical interpretation and a theatrical production that flies on the wings of music,” but is concerned that the public would not understand the term (11). He and Green then opt to call the work a “symphonic outdoor drama” (11). Regardless of its name, Green’s *The Lost Colony* has a folk origin, thanks to Koch, and contains many of the elements found in Hunter’s *Unto These Hills* and Carson’s *Swamp Gravy* plays.

The other long-running outdoor drama in North Carolina, *Unto These Hills*, follows about ten years after *The Lost Colony* and predates the Colquitt project by more than forty years. Its author, Kermit Hunter, came to Chapel Hill as a graduate student in the Department of Dramatic Art in 1948, and did not study under Koch but definitely benefited from the folk play legacy he established. By the time of Hunter’s arrival, the university was known as a “gathering place for a number of intellectuals interested in folk studies” (Sanders 62). Hunter’s thesis for his master’s degree became the script for an outdoor drama, which is still performed seasonally in Cherokee, North Carolina. Its first performance was on July 1, 1950, and according to the program, over 107,000 people had attended by the end of that first summer, surpassing attendance at other established outdoor dramas. Every year *Unto These Hills* packs in tourist audiences who come to see the story of the Cherokee Indians. “Kermit Hunter’s genius is apparent throughout the drama. His depiction of the tragedy and renaissance of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians has stood the test of time and continues to move audiences today as deeply as it has for the past fifty-one years,” claims the show’s program (19). The script written by
Hunter over half a century ago continues to be used each. The same is true of the script for The Lost Colony. Focusing on Elizabethan settlers to America in the 1600’s, it enjoys an enduring popularity similar to Unto These Hills. Like both of these dramas based on seventeenth and nineteenth century history respectively, Swamp Gravy, with its stories about the life of plain folks, the everyday people in southwest Georgia in the early twentieth century, hopes to be around for a long time, too. The project is now in its thirteenth year, so it has a certain stability and established history, too. It also started in much the same way as The Lost Colony and Unto These Hills as a determination to tell a distinct story about a particular group of people. All three productions have general historical value while they also honor specific individuals, and the authors of each create their works by building on history, but not by strictly adhering to it.

One writer observes of Green: “While he certainly took artistic liberties with his interpretations, he did in the main create a sense of history that has a ring of truth” (The Lost Colony 1999 Souvenir Program 16). Green himself admits to fiction in creating the John Borden-Elinor Dare love story to enhance the plot of The Lost Colony. A New York drama critic, writing in 1937, expresses it this way: “The Lost Colony is a simply stated idealization of the adventurous impulse that founded this nation in the restless images of Shakespeare’s England. Paul Green has written history with a compassion that turns his characters into unconscious symbols of a brave new world” (5). In Unto These Hills, it is the hero, Tsali, whose story Hunter alters for dramatic purposes. “This ‘average’ man found himself in circumstances he might never have imagined and his reaction to historical forces much greater than himself made him into a hero and martyr for the Cherokee who remained in the mountains of Western North Carolina,” says one writer (Unto These Hills program 21). In history, Tsali’s plot to avenge his wife’s ill treatment by soldiers results in his accidentally killing one of the soldiers; in Hunter’s play, the wife is brutally clubbed to death by the soldier when she stumbles. While Jo Carson in her Swamp Gravy plays makes no attempt to depict a chronological history of a group of people as Green and Hunter do, she does engage in dramatic license to write her plays based on the stories of a “folk,” a group of people united by a common rural heritage, and her character choices are certainly a part of the community’s history. In The Rock and the Hard Place, Carson follows the career of two local outlaws who gain national fame by
their escape from Alcatraz. In another play, Special Edition, she traces the life of the woman who founded the local newspaper and achieved state level recognition in journalism. When the playwright moves to figures of only local importance, she exercises her dramatic license to its greatest degree. Her changes in characters such as the doctor in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine and the preacher in The Gospel Truth involve combining the stories of more than one person into a single character or adding humorous lines that were not necessarily in the original story.

All three productions are showcased in unique performance spaces designed specifically for them. The Lost Colony’s Waterside Theatre on Roanoke Island is a tourist attraction in itself with its main stage “a log-structured, thatched-roofed, palisaded settlement area that includes a chapel, four cabins, and ramparts” (program 12). Unto These Hills has its own picturesque theater. With the stars and moon serving as the ceiling, the uncovered seating area, cut into the tree-covered hillside, looks down upon an expansive dirt stage. Various portable staging areas with different sets become the settlers’ village while open areas serve as Indian camps. As an inside venue set in south Georgia, Swamp Gravy may not have the panoramic Atlantic Ocean or the scenic Smoky Mountains as natural backdrops, but it does have its own unusual performance space adapted for the production. This folklife play has a theater that was once a functional part of the agrarian community; it was essential to the crop harvest. Cotton Hall, the home of Swamp Gravy, is just what its name implies, a cotton warehouse converted into theater. After the cotton was ginned across the street, the bales were stored in this facility until it could be shipped to other parts of the country. The unique multi-staging areas, brick walls, moss-draped posts, and three-sided seating areas in the theater retain the look and feel of the original warehouse. As it leads the way into the theater, a brick courtyard winds through the building past the Museum of Southern Culture, a gift shop with Swamp Gravy souvenirs and local crafts, and Nug’s Café, the concession area, which is a re-creation of restaurant from Colquitt’s past. In their distinct ways, the theaters for the three productions, The Lost Colony’s Waterside Theatre, the Unto These Hills amphitheatre, and Swamp Gravy’s Cotton Hall offer settings that physically reinforce the subjects of the plays being staged there.

Common folklife elements are also found in the productions’ costumes, music, and
choreography. Both of the North Carolina plays provide colorful spectacles with elaborate period costumes, piped-in music, and carefully choreographed dance sequences. The Elizabethan attire dates The Lost Colony while the bright, intricately designed Native American dress in contrast to 1800’s fashion of the white settlers in Unto These Hills both establishes the time period and emphasizes the difference in the two clashing cultures. Swamp Gravy, on the other hand, lacks the ostentatious costumes of the historical outdoor dramas. Because its plays present a mixture of stories without references to specific dates, the Swamp Gravy look is intentionally vague to cover a time span that ranges roughly from 1900-1970. Cast members have a generic look of the past, a midway point in the extremes, with their replicas of Depression era farm clothes. No garish colors are present, and all costumes are chosen to provide a fairly uniform look of poor, rural folks. Most women are in small-print mid-calf-length shirtwaist dresses with dark stockings and laced boots, and the men sport overalls or khaki or dark pants with suspenders, collarless subdued plaid shirts, and brogans. Like the costumes, the music in Swamp Gravy is simple as well. There is no orchestra; instead the music, which is an integral part of each production, is provided by pianist, Steve Hacker, as he accompanies soloists and full-cast choruses in vocal numbers. The Lost Colony’s intricate Elizabethan madrigals and Unto These Hills’ ceremonial Native American dances have their choreographic counterparts in Swamp Gravy’s occasional square dance and uncomplicated motions to accent the songs.

The scripts are the major difference, though, between the outdoor dramas in North Carolina and the folklife play in Georgia. All three productions use similar tactics, costumes, music, and choreography, to create a successful show that will entertain audiences and generate revenue. However, The Lost Colony and Unto These Hills each have only one script, one story to tell year after year, or more specifically tourist season after tourist season. Because these two productions have used the same script for over fifty years, they qualify for Thomas Green’s and Burson’s definitions of a folk drama rather than a folk play. Swamp Gravy is a scripted performance, too, but the same script is not used every year. A variety of stories is being told in each play, and different plays have been performed over the years. Carson has written six for the project (if Good Medicine is considered a new play: Swamp Gravy Sketches, The Blue Doctor, The
Gospel Truth, Special Edition, The Rock and the Hard Place, and Good Medicine. Each of these plays usually runs for two seasons a year, month-long weekend schedules in the fall and spring, so the repetition generally found in the folk drama is not part of the Swamp Gravy plan. The use of a broad theme and multiple stories to then illustrate a theme gives Carson the opportunity to fill her plays with folklife elements, which serve a thematic function in her works. In addition to their obvious illustrative qualities, the folklife elements may provide a social commentary as well. It is the inclusion of such details that probably prompted Cathy Cox to name Swamp Gravy a folklife play rather than a folk play or folk drama. Folklife elements are an integral part of the story in Swamp Gravy plays while they seem to be only establishing the time periods in the North Carolina dramas.

For instance, Carson’s first offering, Sketches, focuses on the theme of work. The folks of Colquitt, Georgia, see themselves as hard-working, God-fearing people, and Carson highlights labor activities indigenous to this farming community. One scene in Sketches called “Cotton” is written as a preacher delivering a sermon on the benefits of cotton. The song, sounding like a spiritual, that follows the scene then encapsulates the dark history associated with cotton production. While the song, like the sermon, lists what seem to be folklife details of the many products derived from cotton, it also admits cotton was the “reason a people was enslaved” and the “reason Civil War was waged.” “Cotton has a dark side, dark as night,” is the song’s refrain. Carson’s use of a sermon as the staging device, followed by the song, accomplishes two folklife objectives. With the preacher’s delivery, the tribute to cotton is also a kind of reenactment of southern religion. As Colquittan Karen Kimbrel puts it, “We’re not just in the Bible belt; we are the buckle on the Bible belt” (“Personal Interview,” September, 1995). By using the sermon technique, Carson links the South’s religious fervor and its total dependence on the crop in this unexpected worship service to “King Cotton.” Ultimately, the playwright creates a scene not only about the hardships of growing cotton but about its importance to the southern economy. She ends that scene in Sketches by having one farm worker, who could pick “three hundred pounds a day and leave the sun running,” hang up her cotton sack and become a domestic (21). As she tells the audience the salary she now earns as a maid, which is even less than what she made picking cotton, viewers realize instantly the
plight of laborers in the rural South. These specific folklife details about cotton production that Carson embeds in the script leave the audience with an understanding of the work to be done on a farm and a realistic impression of farm hand’s life as one of long hours with maximum physical labor for minimal wages.

Other scenes that depict folklife in Sketches are “Peanuts” and “Mayhaw Gathering” as they target more work peculiar to this area. “Peanuts” has a cast of characters, both male and female, explaining the dirty, back-breaking work of harvesting peanuts to show that this task was performed by everyone, black and white, male and female, adults and children, while “Mayhaw Gathering,” typically woman’s work, features only female characters. Carson develops this latter folklife scene with an insider/outsider approach. One woman, not a native of Miller County, asks about the process, and the local women and girls patiently explain how mayhaw jelly comes into being, from wading into mayhaw ponds and watching out for snakes to gather the berries to boiling the juice to make the jelly. Once again Carson’s script takes the folk knowledge of these skills and passes it on to those in the audience, who may have never even heard of mayhaws before coming to Swamp Gravy. Consequently, the folklife specificity of Carson’s plays not only provides entertainment but also works to preserve the knowledge of the old ways and to educate and inform the audience about them.

Her later plays contain folklife details for the same reasons. Although The Blue Doctor highlights the medical profession with the main character a doctor, it also pays tribute to folk medicine through a series of calls and responses. A cast member calls out an ailment, and another answers the question with the proper home remedy used by some south Georgians. “What do you do for a burn on the skin?” someone asks (The Blue Doctor 4). “Some can talk the fire out of it,” or “rub lard on it,” are the two suggested cures (The Blue Doctor 4). For a bee sting, the recommendation is “put chewed tobacco on the sting or Clorox” (The Blue Doctor 4). Also the medical cases that the Blue Doctor encounters are specific to the rural community. One patient has been kicked by a mule while plowing; another steps on a rusty nail in the barn and has lock jaw, and someone else has a rattlesnake bite, which the doctor douses with whiskey and extracts the venom with his mouth. In choosing such specific medical cases to include, Carson represents the hazards facing the “folk” of this farming community.
In *The Gospel Truth*, Carson turns the folklife focus on religion and expands that brief preacher portrait in *Sketches*. “I was twenty-two, twenty-three, somewhere in there, and I went to church because it was my raising, and if you didn’t go, the folks at the church would come out to your house and ask you what was wrong with you. Why weren’t you in church?” says one character, establishing the importance of religion in the south Georgia community (*The Gospel Truth* 5) In the church scenes, Carson foregrounds the religious practices of the rural South. From her inclusion of funeral parlor fans to shouters and the “Amen” corner, from the preacher’s sermon delivery to the choice of hymns, she is true to the culture. She even manages to include lines about proper clothing and acceptable behavior in church. “I wore dresses that were consistently too tight and shoes that were already small because, although I was younger than my sister, I was to be the bigger woman and I was already her size, but I was still wearing her hand-me-downs. I was uncomfortable to say the least,” admits one church-goer. These lines reveal that females were expected to wear dresses and that folks were not wealthy, or at the very least, that clothes were not plentiful, as the hand-me-downs to younger siblings indicate (*The Gospel Truth* 7). Carson offers yet other folklife details in describing the uncomfortable men’s wear at church. Formal clothing was the norm for men as well, evidenced by the lines: “I remember the first time I had to wear a tie. My dad tied it, and I thought I was choked” (*The Gospel Truth* 7).

Along with wardrobe information, Carson’s script verbalizes actions of the people during worship services. Adults, teens, and children reminisce about misbehavior in church. “I remember church. Pews that were very hard, and high for a child, so you sat there with your feet dangling, and there’s only one thing to do to keep the circulation: you kick them,” says one child (*The Gospel Truth* 6). In her stage directions, Carson has the teens reading hymn titles and adding “between the sheets” after each one. An adult female is horrified as she listens and denies ever participating in such blasphemous behavior, but another woman reminds her, “Oh, yes, we did. ‘Just As I Am’ between the sheets” (*The Gospel Truth* 8). All of these lines included in the script by Carson create a sense of place and provide a look at customs associated with religion in Colquitt.

Her next play, *Special Edition*, also contains many folklife elements, this time about eating habits. While the main story line follows the life of newspaper founder,
Zula B. Toole, the play has cooking and food, another field of folklife study, as a secondary theme. The first line of the script is “I come from dinner on the grounds that included big bowls of lima beans, turnip greens, potato salad - one with mustard and one without - fresh peas, corn, fried okra, and a platter of fresh red ripe tomatoes” (Special Edition 1). Then the next speaker says, “And two hams, one cured and one fresh. The cured one came sliced and fried and packed in the middle of cat-head biscuits” followed by another character calling out, “Fried chicken!” (Special Edition 1). This cataloging of food items by Carson gives this play an immediate southern flavor. Carson also inserts instructions on how to barbecue a pig, and she has the men folk discuss their preferred techniques. “Dig a pit six feet by three feet, and at least a foot and a half deep. If you are going to turn the meat on a spit, it is a good idea to set the rigging up before you start the fire,” advises one male (Special Edition 26). “Line the pit with rocks and build a fire,” offers another while a third man gives tips on the proper firewood: “Pecan burns longest, makes the most heat and best coals, and imparts a nice flavor to the meat. Do not use walnut or locust. They’ve got bitter oils in them that will taint the meat. Do not use pine, it burns too fast and makes everything taste like turpentine” (Special Edition 26). Carson does not stop there; she then adds recipes for barbecue sauce. Once again it is the men who have this folk knowledge to impart, and a comical debate rages over what makes the best barbecue sauce.

Another scene called “Cooks and Recipes” starts with arguments over how to make “cracklin’ cornbread” and Brunswick stew. “My grandmother uses pork and chicken for meat. She would cook the meat, take it off the bone and grind it. Then she’d add potatoes, tomatoes, onions, corn, whatever. Now her sister uses ‘hogs head,’” explains the speaker as the way to make the best Brunswick stew, truly a southern dish (Special Edition 13). Carson ends this scene with a young girl’s story about making rice pirleu, which she says starts with “a number three wash pot and twenty gallons of water, seven, sometimes eight chickens, a couple of older ones for flavor, if you can get ‘em” (Special Edition 13). All of these details of food preparation included by Carson allow Swamp Gravy to live up to its name of folklife play and provide visiting audience members with a greater knowledge of the southern diet.

Ironically, it was also that same play, Special Edition, loaded with specific folklife
details that caused Carson some trouble. The Swamp Gravy cast found fault with her script when she used cooking a bear as the subject for the men’s recipe scenes. When the Colquitt folks read the text, several complained about her choice of a bear, saying this species is certainly not a local delicacy. After hearing many comments for example, about how the people in Tennessee may cook bears but not the people in Georgia, the production committee asked Carson to change the scene so that it related more directly to Colquitt. Hence, the local people monitored the details and insisted that the script stay true to their culture. Acquiescing in her role as hired community playwright, Carson did rewrite the scene but could not resist sprinkling it with references to her banished Tennessee bear. A woman says, “If you have to feed a lot of people, plan something big for the meat because then the men will cook it outside. So cook a cow, cook a pig. Cook a deer. Cook a bear” (Special Edition 26). “Cook a bear? There’s no bear here. Where you gonna get a bear?” responds one male (Special Edition 26). Another man defends the bear suggestion, remarking, “There used to be bear here,” to which the first male retorts, “There’s not now. You want a bear, go to Tennessee” (Special Edition 26). Although her “cook a bear” reference in Special Edition may have rung false to the south Georgians, Carson turned this gaffe into an advantage, using the jibes about cooking a bear to add humor to her script. Furthermore, this one example of missing the mark stands against the hundreds of very specific and very accurate folklife details in her six Swamp Gravy plays.

In The Rock and the Hard Place, the author includes other ways of the folk as she has a scene in Act One show the preparation of a body for burial and the conclusion of the play set at a southern funeral. Although these rituals of death are certainly folklife details, this production is more like Koch’s definition of a folk play and more in keeping with Green’s The Lost Colony and Hunter’s Unto These Hills. Both of the North Carolina folk dramas feature stories based on history and legend, and Carson’s The Rock and the Hard Place highlights the Anglins, two legendary brothers from south Georgia who become known nationally for their daring escape from Alcatraz. Rather than focus only on the details of everyday folklife in this play, Carson weaves the tale of the Anglins, starting with them as poor farm boys in south Georgia and moving on to their lives as bank robbers and prisoners no jail could hold. She chooses to include information
that specifically maximizes their status as legends. The brothers are portrayed at first as harmless, fun-loving boys, robbing a bank with a water pistol instead of a real gun. The playwright also stages stories, which show the Anglins as larger-than-life tricksters. In one scene women who knew them as boys discuss how they rob the same bank twice in one day, much to the embarrassment of local authorities. In the final scene the prison escapees come back for their mother’s funeral dressed up as women and, thereby, fool the FBI agents who were waiting to apprehend them. With such details in the script, Carson elevates Clarence and J.W. Anglin to the status of folk heroes.

Throughout her writing for the Colquitt community, folklife elements are definitely an integral part of the scripts, and Carson’s ability to slide in such details gives the Swamp Gravy plays a strong sense of place, a sense of the south Georgia way of farm life. Her folklife plays also reflect the folk play concept formulated by Koch at the turn of the twentieth century. He “emphasized that the content of the plays was essentially a vehicle: ‘we cherish the locality, believing that if we interpret the locality faithfully it may show us the way to the universal” (Zug 281). For Frederick Koch, the purpose of the folk play is to “make a significant revelation of human character and experience through an accurate and realistic portrayal of a particular folk group,” which is exactly what Carson manages to do in her folklife plays (Zug 281). Swamp Gravy plays may differ with their script variety from the outdoor dramas or folk dramas of Paul Green and Kermit Hunter, whose scripts each tell only one story, but Carson’s work overall seems similar in design and intent to these two predecessors. To Tillis, the folk drama also accomplishes what Koch calls for in a folk play. He says, “Indeed, given the nearly universal impulse toward drama, it might well be that folk drama can teach us something not only about particular cultures, but about humanity at large” (11). To be able to definitively categorize her work as a folk play, a folk drama, or a folklife play is not nearly as important as it is to recognize what she accomplishes in her scripts. Carson takes the particular in Sketches, sweating in a peanut field, and uses it to show the human condition, the necessity of work for survival. She takes the particular in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine, sicknesses and injuries specific to the rural South, and uses them to examine issues of health and well being. She takes the particular in The Gospel Truth, Bible-thumping religion, and uses it to illustrate man’s apparent need for faith and
worship. She takes the particular in *Special Edition*, southern cuisine, and uses it to comment on the pleasures of food. Finally, she takes the particular in *The Rock and the Hard Place*, two legendary bank robbers, and uses them to analyze concepts of law and order. The Swamp Gravy plays achieve what Tillis calls “self-presentation and self-reflection of humanity itself” (11). Through her writing for the “Official Folklife Play of Georgia,” Jo Carson is able to use the particular, that is the rural way of life in a small town in southwest Georgia, to effectively represent the entire state of Georgia and to say something about human kind. Folklife details, a key ingredient in Carson’s plays for Swamp Gravy, add specificity to ideas and qualities that also have a universal appeal. They are an important element in southern drama, and through her playwriting, Carson offers a looks at the city of Colquitt, the state of Georgia, and the region of the South.
A SPRINKLE OF SOUTHERN DRAMA

While Swamp Gravy with its scripts by Jo Carson has the distinction of being Georgia’s “Official Folklife Play,” her writing for the project can also be considered southern drama. One of the main characteristics of her dramatic structure is her use of storytelling, also a central technique of much southern drama. This chapter will look at how Carson relies on storytelling to write her Swamp Gravy plays. The Swamp Gravy brochures and programs, however, do not actually credit her with “writing” the plays; instead the wording on these documents is “adapted by Jo Carson.” If so, it is an odd form of adaptation. This term usually refers to taking an existing literary work and changing it into another genre. A short story, play, or novel becomes a movie; or, for instance, Frank Galati appropriates Steinbeck’s novel, The Grapes of Wrath, and adapts it for the stage. Carson, on the other hand, undertakes a very different task. In contrast to adaptations that usually involve editing and/or shaping an extant work for the stage or screen, Carson has to write a brand new script from the range of stories collected. The playwright starts with a batch of unpublished, unconnected interviews; she often targets one particular individual’s story as the central spine or main story and then selects other stories from interviews and creates scenes out of them. Finally she combines all the scenes to create a new unified piece of literature. Therefore, her Swamp Gravy scripts are the result of writing, not adapting. Carson does use the stories of others as a springboard for writing her kind of southern drama.

“We can know that the process of story is prominent and compelling in much of American drama even if the storytelling is not in the form of direct address to the audience, and even if the storytelling is not housed in a primarily realist, linear style of theatrical presentation,” Betty Jean Jones says of southern drama in general (Alternate Roots xxiv). In writing for Swamp Gravy, Carson incorporates storytelling and sometimes direct address into her plays. The use of storytellers influences the structure
and plot of her Swamp Gravy work while the themes, characterizations, and settings chosen for the works also shape Carson’s brand of southern drama.

The structure found in all of her Swamp Gravy works except Sketches is a variation of that used in her earlier play, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, which is anthologized in Alternate Roots: Plays from the Southern Theater. Calling that play “an education in itself,” Carson says, “I’ve written two other plays (and stories and essays) since I began work on Preacher, and all my work has benefited from the experience of this one” (Alternate Roots 269). Its benefit is evident in the structuring of her Swamp Gravy plays. In these works she relies on the split-focus technique established in A Preacher with a Horse to Ride. Carson uses an insider/outsider perspective about a coal miners’ strike in Preacher, and the action unfolds as the playwright alternates scenes from the point of view of the strikers to that of one journalist. Beginning with newspaper accounts of a hearing on a coal miners’ strike, Carson writes the drama based on this historical event. Her fictional coal miner characters share the stage with a well-known writer of the day, Theodore Dreiser, who helped conduct the hearing. The playwright sets up the insider/outsider dichotomy by presenting first a scene about the hungry, jobless coal miners and following it with a scene about Dreiser, the well-fed, well-paid writer, dining in a restaurant unaware or unconcerned about that hunger.

While he is in Kentucky, Dreiser speaks of his sympathy for the strikers; his actions, however, reveal his complete lack of comprehension and/or compassion for their plight. “It is a story that is my size, a whole people who are used and thrown away,” says the character Dreiser (Alternate Roots 297), who has earlier in the play stated a more selfish motive for being in Kentucky: “I have to go. I will make me again, John. It will be my next book” (Alternate Roots 296). With her alternating, contrasting scenes throughout A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, Carson critiques Dreiser without ever having other characters deliver a single word of condemnation while she also moves the plot along. By the end of the play, two stories have been told, one of the failed coal miners’ strike due to murder and corruption and the other of Dreiser’s revived success as a writer because of his participation in the hearings and coverage of the strike.

Like Preacher, the Swamp Gravy plays have a plot progression found in more traditional drama; they even have Aristotle’s required beginning, middle, and end.
However, the structure could never be considered strictly linear as the plot is the spine story that weaves around other stand-alone stories. Transitional devices between scenes provide the unity. While Preacher has a clear back-and-forth configuration of scenes, Carson threads the main storyline in The Blue Doctor, The Gospel Truth, Special Edition, The Rock and the Hard Place, and Good Medicine, through stories on the same subject.

For example, The Blue Doctor and its later counterpart, Good Medicine, focus on the obvious theme of how to cure physical ills, and each uses the life story of the Blue Doctor as the spine or plot. In both plays, Carson resorts to the alternating pattern established in A Preacher with a Horse to Ride to counter home remedies and folk ways with prescriptions and doctor’s visits. Also individual stories spin off the spine, which is the life story of the Blue Doctor. The scenes about the doctor are the plot of the play, tracking how he gets his name, how he spends his leisure time, how he deals with specific medical crises, and how he dies.

Carson’s storytelling technique also works to advance the plot in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine as it is the doctor’s daughter who narrates stories about her father’s personal life. Two scenes in which she tells about his recreational activities offer relief from the grim side of medicine, and they link up related stories to the plot. First, she shares the tall tale of her father and his friends going out to dynamite some fish. An obedient dog foils the plan when it retrieves the stick of lighted dynamite and brings it back to his master. The daughter’s last line is, “One of them – I don’t know which – caught the dog, and got the dynamite back in the water before it blew, but … Lord” (Blue Doctor and Good Medicine 7). The action in the play then switches immediately to the doctor, who shakes his head and says, “Rabies” (Good Medicine 7). As he examines a patient who has rabies, a disease usually associated with dog bites, he utters this one word, and it instantly bridges the daughter’s humorous spine story about the dynamite-fetching dog to a serious scene about one of the doctor’s untreatable cases.

In another instance of the daughter as storyteller, she shares an anecdote about the physician at leisure, which serves to introduce the next scene of the doctor at work. The daughter says when he meets people for the first time and they find out he is a doctor, they immediately want him to cure their ailments. On one occasion when he is again off with his friends and does not want to have to offer free medical advice, one of his buddies
tells a waitress the Blue Doctor is “a Russian and did not speak the English language” (Good Medicine 9). The daughter then delivers the punch line, quoting the waitress who thinks the doctor can’t understand her as saying: “He sure is an ugly little son of a bitch, isn’t he?” (Good Medicine 10). Following the laugh, the daughter adds, “They did things like that to each other. But then, he did some things to other people” (Good Medicine 10).

Her last line of the scene serves as the transition to the next one, “Reluctant Nurse,” where the doctor does indeed do things to other people as he convinces a young woman to assist him in surgery. She is squeamish and has conveyed her reluctance to be a nurse, yet he insists she hold a patient’s intestines while he performs an appendectomy. When she refuses to do as she is told, his concluding remark is, “Hard to find a good nurse,” (Good Medicine 12). This line by the Blue Doctor then sets up the next nurse story. The subsequent scene, “Tonsils,” offers a contrast to the “Reluctant Nurse” and tells of a nurse so dedicated to her duties that she does not take off any time for her own health. The Blue Doctor takes out her tonsils, and she goes right back to work after the impromptu surgery. “She worked till she fainted. So he sent her back to the operating room to lie down till she felt better. And when she felt better, she got up and went to work again,” recounts the daughter (Good Medicine 13). Throughout these two plays about medicine, Carson continuously links the main story line about the Blue Doctor to the auxiliary scenes, thus creating plots to follow. Her structure of contrast and flow of the plot are proof that she is not just lining up unrelated stories as separate entities on stage. Carson is writing a unified play.

In The Gospel Truth, her connectors between the spine and the stories of others are even more visible. Her linking device for the story of the preacher’s life to other stories of sins and faith is his sermon on the Ten Commandments. As his sermon progresses in installments, the minister ends each preaching scene with a booming “Thou shalt not,” and symbolically breaks a dinner plate against the back wall of the theater. The “thou shalt not” line and sound of the shattering plate introduces the next scene about someone literally breaking one of the commandments. While the Ten Commandments definitely serve as a unifying element throughout the play, the preacher’s daughter as the narrator also knits together his life story that is marked by recurring incidents of fire. The preacher, she tells the audience, answered the call to ministry after he had a dream of fire.
He saw folks suspended over hell and decided his life work was to rescue them from eternal hellfire and damnation. Then three times in his life, he was burned by fire: when he was a child, when he was a soldier in World War II, and when he was an old man.

The playwright focuses on his dream of fire and each of these successive encounters with fire to encapsulate his life experience as a fiery preacher. The resultant script is a tight weave of two threads: the daughter’s narrative of his life and his sermon’s examination of God’s law. By the end of the play, Carson has thoughtfully considered each of the Ten Commandments through the lens of other people’s stories which she introduced with segments of the preacher’s sermon. The playwright has also narrated the preacher’s life, thus provided plot, through the daughter’s remembrances of his fire stories. Structurally, The Gospel Truth comes closer to a more traditional drama, yet it still has that characteristic Carson reliance on storytelling and her preference for an interrupted narrative of the main story with related stories.

In her next Swamp Gravy play, Special Edition, the dramatic structure is not as tight as that in The Gospel Truth and is more similar to A Preacher with a Horse to Ride. Special Edition relies on antithesis to move the plot along. In this play, Carson foregrounds the story of Zula B. Toole, the first woman editor of a newspaper in Georgia, and possibly in the United States. She founded Colquitt’s weekly newspaper, the Miller County Liberal, in 1898, and Carson alternates the biography of this remarkable woman and her coverage of the sensational news of the day with mundane stories about food preparation and cooking. Carson continually inserts verbal links from the editor’s scenes to the culinary contrasts. One illustration of her attempt at a unified structure is Miss Zula proofing a newspaper article about germs in food, which prompts a scene about family recipes. Stories about other people also make their way into Carson’s script as part of the plot. Their stories are events reported by the editor in her newspaper. The reporter hook introduces “Secret Marriage,” a story of elopement being made public; “Brown Dress,” an incident of domestic abuse ending in homicide; and “Neighbors,” a look at farm folks lending a helping hand to those in need. In Special Edition, Carson interjects unexpected divergence, stories about food preparation, and plausible convergence, stories based on Miss Zula’s duties as a newspaper editor and reporter. The two contrasting strands relate to the plot, which follows the editor’s life story with scenes showing her first career as a
school teacher, her founding of a newspaper as a young widow, her marrying again out of convenience, and her losing a beloved son in a tragic accident. Some of the scenes about cooking also show progression as the men begin with methods of cooking a pig and continue with arguments about the best barbecue sauce. While *Special Edition* lacks the tightness of *The Gospel Truth*, the overall effect of the play is one of cohesiveness.

In her next Swamp Gravy script, *The Rock and the Hard Place*, Carson attempts her most complex structure. She interlaces four plots, stories about the Anglin Brothers, a female school superintendent, moonshine-making women, and an African American woman. Along with three installments of each of these four separate story lines, which do show some progression, Carson adds four different scenes for children called “Flock I, II, III and IV,” one scene called “Teen Stories, and three appearances by the “Batts’ Hummock” mystery man. Because of its obvious structural density, *The Rock and the Hard Place* is much more difficult to follow than her previous Swamp Gravy plays. Also an Alzheimer’s hindered superintendent, two inebriated women, and an incarcerated African American female are no match for two daring bank robbers who end up in Alcatraz. The Anglin brothers are the most memorable characters of the play and the ones featured in the closing scene. Furthermore, the children’s “Flock I, II, III, and IV” leave the viewer perplexed, wondering how they relate to the overall play. Because these scenes are about the sheriff’s children, who grow up in the jail and help their father occasionally capture criminals, they loosely fit with the Anglins’ outlaw saga. However, Carson does not clearly integrate these four scenes with her usual easy-to-follow connections. “Teen Stories” is a single scene plopped down in Act Two that has reference lines to the Anglin Brothers, but the opening dialogue focuses on school while the bulk of the scene features teens telling stories that do not seem to support the rest of the play. Their stories are about conquering fear, one about slinging snakes out of the way while wading through the swamp, another about being trapped in the absolute darkness of a cave, and a final story about getting in trouble at school. This last teen story does precede “Superintendent III, but its ending lines do not adequately set up the scene which follows. While the Batts Hammock motif, a story told by one man of witnessing someone dragging a heavy sack through the woods, adds an air of mystery, it has no direct correlation to the rest of the play’s action. Carson’s *The Rock and the Hard Place* is
certainly an ambitious work structurally, but it seems to have too much going on; consequently the unity of the play suffers.

Regardless of her organizational patterns and their degrees of success, it is clear that Jo Carson writes scripts for plays; she does not just tell stories or adapt interviews. As a playwright, she structures the scripts around storytelling and direct address, but the result is a play with a plot that can be followed from beginning to end. In fact, it is Carson’s playwriting that moves Swamp Gravy from a storytelling festival to a theater experience for its audience members while using storytelling as a central structural device.

Other aspects of her earlier work, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, help establish the elements of southern drama that also shape the Swamp Gravy plays. A Preacher with a Horse to Ride is one of the selections included in Alternate Roots: Plays from the Southern Theater. Ruber Lerner calls the Alternate Roots’ organization “a grassroots cultural movement, peculiar to the South, whose aim is to be part of the transformation of the region by acknowledging and critically assessing its past, particularly with regard to race, uncovering its buried history and untold stories, and celebrating its heroes” (Alternate Roots xvi). Swamp Gravy is also “assessing its past” with Carson’s plays which strive to look at a small southern community, to tell its stories, both good and bad, and to honor its people. Alternate Roots is further described as “an arts service organization, a problem-solving system for southeastern performing artists, creating opportunities for constructive dialogue about developing work and avenues for exposure for completed work,” founded in 1976 (Alternate Roots xvi). Similarly, Swamp Gravy is a project of the Colquitt/Miller County Arts Council, with a mission to promote the arts in general and to empower individuals through performance. The Alternate Roots anthology of southern drama also includes essays on what constitutes this genre, and although opinions vary about its components, all the essayists agree there is something unique about the term, “southern drama.”

Charles Watson in The History of Southern Drama defines southern drama as a unique genre dependent on place, that is geographic boundaries, and includes those states that were part of the Confederacy. Betty Jean Jones, writing in her essay, “Southern American Drama and Communal Context of Story,” also says geography matters: “To
know who you are is to know where you are. Place/location/setting is essential to the dramatic process of being. It is through the connectedness of place that one’s journey to any sense of truth and beauty (aesthetics) begins” (Alternate Roots xii). Southern drama, therefore, is distinctly bound by land, by location, and Carson’s Swamp Gravy plays written about Colquitt, Georgia, certainly display this geographical focus.

According to Watson, southern drama is also identifiable by a list of specific literary traits. He points to “the presence of one or more distinctive social types,” an emphasis on violence and fundamentalist religion, a “dependence on southern legendry,” “a highly recognizable form of speech,” and “a spirited injection of late local color” as characteristic of southern drama (2-5). Again Jones echoes Watson, saying “Southern drama grows out of a region where the democracy of personage is a legacy running the gamut of shame, struggle and success, and back again” (Alternate Roots xxiii). All of the features noted by Lerner, Egerton, Watson, and Jones are central to Carson’s writing. Her works, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride and the Swamp Gravy community plays, are similar to those of other writers included in the Alternate Roots publication as well as those of nationally known southern playwrights such as Paul Green, Tennessee Williams, and Beth Henley. Through her plays for the Colquitt community, Carson offers a slice of life in the South.

Carson presents “distinctive social types” through her Swamp Gravy characters, and, thereby gives a diverse look at the people of Colquitt. “It is hard to overestimate the leadership of Paul Green in giving direction to southern drama in the twentieth century,” observes Watson, who adds that Green “gave southern drama wide national appeal” (121). Green is the “comprehensive dramatist of southern life by portraying three major social types: the Negro, the poor white, and the aristocrat” (103). Like Green, Carson attempts to portray all of the people of the specific southern locale that she is writing about. In A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, she creates characters that represent the Kentucky community; she populates the play with the “poor white,” striking miners and their wives and children and with the “aristocrat,” the newspaper editor, the governor, and the visiting journalists. For Swamp Gravy, Carson provides a cross-section of social types in the Colquitt community. Scenes depict the lives of African Americans, and her farmers and townspeople often fall into Green’s “poor white” category. The closest
Carson comes to his “aristocrat” is with her characterization of professional people in the community: the doctor in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine, the preacher in The Gospel Truth, the editor in Special Edition, and the school superintendent in The Rock and the Hard Place. While Henley “contributes a striking picture of contemporary life in the South,” Carson’s characters show the lives of people in the past of a small southern town (Watson, 201-202).

Another characteristic of southern drama noted by Watson is an emphasis on violence, and this trait can be found in both Henley’s works and in Carson’s. Henley has the shooting of a husband as the focus of the action in Crimes of the Heart while Preacher involves the murder of an informant in the coal mining strike. For Swamp Gravy, Carson creates a scene in every play, which looks at violence. The Blue Doctor features a pregnant woman who is fearful of giving birth to a girl baby. “He beats me if it’s not a boy baby,” she says of her husband (31). Its rewrite, Good Medicine, features “Burn,” another scene of family violence in which a stepmother chases her stepdaughter with an ax. When the child climbs a tree to get away from her, the stepmother sets the tree on fire with her stepdaughter in it. The scene itself is a dialogue between the now grown stepdaughter and her own daughter:

Mother: I climbed a tree in our yard because I didn’t think she could do that.
Daughter: And she couldn’t?
Mother: She didn’t even try. She whacked it a couple of times with the ax, and I guess she decided that was too much hard work, cutting down a tree.
Daughter: So?
Mother: So she got straw from the shed and branches of kindling wood, and she lit a fire around the bottom of the tree.
Daughter: A big fire?
Mother: Big enough.
Daughter: You’ve got the scars.
Mother: My legs were burnt. My arms were burnt. The clothes were burnt off my body, but I didn’t let go of that tree. That’s how Daddy found me. He had to pry my fingers away from the tree (41-42).
Ironically in a play about cures and healing, Carson includes this scene of raw violence, where the hatred of a stepmother for her husband’s child almost results in the daughter’s death. Carson’s willingness to write and stage “Burn” is a testimony to the honesty of the playwright and of the community. The scene reveals the omnipresent threat of violence that can exist even in families. Does the South have a predilection for family violence? Carson seems to be answering yes to the question in the Swamp Gravy plays.

In *Gospel Truth*, it is the “Thou Shalt Not Kill” scene, which uses World War II as the example of man’s violence towards his fellow man, and this play also has a scene of implied violence. A black midwife who comes to deliver a white woman’s baby has to be accompanied by an armed escort to guarantee the midwife’s safety because the hate-filled father-in-law of the white woman won’t allow blacks on his property. While Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* is a humorous look at spousal violence, Carson’s *Special Edition* contains “Brown Dress,” a serious scene about a woman’s shooting of her husband after years of physical abuse to her and their children. In Carson’s final Swamp Gravy play, *The Rock and the Hard Place*, one of the main storylines looks at the Anglin brothers, bank robbers who are sent to prison. It also traces installments of “Education,” scenes about an African American female’s incarceration that resulted from her participation in a bar room brawl. Her history of violence began during her girlhood when she said “men and boys, especially in the spring when the sap was running high, would wait in these woods in the morning and afternoon and attack any girl they could catch and hold down” (*Special Edition* 15). The narrator tells how she tried to protect herself:

So I learned to hurt people. I learned to carry a knife, and I learned how to use it. And if there were too many men to fight, I tried to outrun them. I was the fastest runner in my school. Once I ran home and got the shotgun and fired at them. Granddaddy put birdshot in it. He didn’t want me killing anybody, but I was perfectly willing to do what it took to get away. Whatever it took. (15)

The character in “Education” continues to use physical violence as a means to solve her problems. In “Education III,” she explains how she ended up in prison:

I was eighteen, I had a broken heart, a new baby, and no steady work. I was unhappy and caught, and partying was the way I knew to get through it. Except one night, I got into a fight. It was a liquor fight, over nothing, but I never was
one to back down, and I knew how to fight. Fighting was what I’d majored in in high school. I didn’t start this fight, but by the time the police threw me on the floor and handcuffed me, I’d beat up the three people pretty bad. I was hurt, too, but I was the only one hauled away to jail. I was a Georgia girl driving in Florida on an expired license, with no visible means of support, an unwed mother, a high school drop-out, a history of hanging out in the wrong places, with an assault and battery charge against me. I was going somewhere for awhile. (46)

In The Rock and the Hard Place, the main story line is about two criminals whose brother, Alfred, is electrocuted in an attempted prison escape. Combine that with this African American female’s life story in the “Education” sequence, and there is a preponderance of violence in the play. Those two plot developments are joined by that of the woman superintendent, an innocuous enough sounding story. She, however, faces threats of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1940’s when she provides bus transportation for both black and white students. “Superintendent III” has the daughter define her mother to the audience: “Know her with this story. A man in a very odd disguise came to our door one night, she had bought the buses and was hiring drivers, and he demanded that she stop what she was doing and threatened her with bodily harm and worse, and she said, ‘Stand with me or stand aside, but I will not be bound by your stupidity or your prejudice or your cowardice’” (44). Through staging such stories as “Education I, II, and III,” the Anglin Brothers, and “Superintendent III,” Carson presents the darker side of the Colquitt community and does not ignore its southern heritage of violence and racism.

In addition to an emphasis on violence, Watson lists fundamentalist religion as characteristic of southern drama, and Carson, too, recognizes the importance of religion in the South. Preacher and her Swamp Gravy plays examine the role of religion in southern life from the coal mines of Kentucky to the farms of south Georgia. In Preacher, Carson portrays religion as not only ineffectual but also burdensome. The preacher in this play comes to eat with families where there is not even enough food for them; they go without so that a meal can be provided for this visitor who is oblivious to their poverty. In the course of the play, his platitudes seem ironic at best. As with Tennessee Williams before her, there is an edge of sarcasm about religion in this early play. Watson calls Williams’ depiction of religion in the South as “relentlessly negative” (187) but admits
that it was Williams’ “ambivalence” that “stimulated his cultural imagination, leading him to express in his southern characters his indignation at southern sexual, religious, and racial narrowness” (191). It is clear that Carson sees religion as an integral part of southern life. Unlike Williams, she is not “relentlessly negative” about the subject in her Swamp Gravy plays. In fact, the earlier rancor of Preacher is missing in The Gospel Truth. Its preacher is a positive character, and his brand of religion, although still fundamentalist with his hellfire and brimstone sermons, is more introspective and self-examining than condemning.

Even the plays about doctoring are packed with scenes that emphasize the community’s strong religious beliefs. For example in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine, one of the ways to stop bleeding is to recite a Bible verse from Ezekiel. In Good Medicine, along with the folk medicine and doctor stories, two of the ways to get well are through prayers and faith healers. Scene Sixteen, “Paul,” is about a preacher who says God has the power to heal the sick. He tells how family members are all gathered in the hospital room waiting for their relative to die. Then the preacher asks them all to leave the room and to take their negativity with them. After he is alone with the man, here is what happens:

And I took a hold of the old man’s foot and got down on my knees and prayed a serious prayer to God, to forgive my brother his sins and Thy will be done. And I felt the old man move his toes while my hand was on them. And I will tell you there was some ego in me, I wanted the doubting Thomases outside the door to doubt themselves instead of God, and I knew this was an opportunity, and I said that to the Lord, too. And when I finished the prayer, I got up, and I rubbed some oil on his forehead and told him I’d see him later. And I let his family back in the door and told them to take heart, and two weeks later when I went by to see him, my brother was sitting up in his bed recovering from his stroke and anxious to go harvest his pecans. True story. (30-31)

To emphasize the power of prayer, Carson includes that scene in Good Medicine. Many of her scenes such as “Paul” are also underscored by hymns; these music selections reinforce the strong religious nature of the community represented on stage.
Scene Twenty features another preacher, who tracks his faith journey. His job as a teen was to get to church early and start the fire before everyone else arrived. Each Sunday he would take advantage of the empty pulpit and practice his preaching skills, but one day he got caught in mid-sermon: “I was screaming and hollering, I was doing the four horsemen and the jaw bone is connected to the neckbone, and I had a head of steam, and my mother’s best friend opened the door. And I slid down that pulpit on my knees, on my belly, and out the back door” (36). After that embarrassing incident, he says he built his own pulpit down in the woods. “I had some very low hard times, and I’d go back in there, and I’d have a devotional and sing a song. And preach myself a sermon sometimes” (36). Unlike his pulpit experience, his church alone in the woods brought him to a true understanding of God, as he confides to the audience:

When I think about it, I went to church because I was supposed to, and I enjoyed it like you do, I like seeing people. I liked the singing. I probably benefited from the sermons, and I really liked watching the preacher, but what I was doing that morning in the church when I thought I was preaching so good was putting on a show. It is why I was so embarrassed when I thought somebody had seen me doing it. When I really needed to talk to God, I went out in the woods by myself. (36)

“The Woods” seems to contrast preaching in church, that is public worship, to really finding God through private conversion. Whether Carson herself believes in organized religion or God remains unstated. She knows from talking to the people of Colquitt, Georgia and listening to their interviews that religion is a big part of this south Georgia community’s life. Consequently, she foregrounds stories of faith in her plays for Swamp Gravy.

Along with an emphasis on religion in southern drama comes what Watson calls a dependence on southern legendry. Paul Green, with his folk plays from the 1920’s and outdoor drama, was one of the first to exhibit this trait (Watson 101). Later, Carson does the same as she relies on folk heroes and prominent citizens as the base for the spine stories in Swamp Gravy. The best example of her use of legend is the Anglin Brothers, whom Carson portrays as Robin Hood type characters. To develop sympathy for them, the playwright creates a scene about one of them almost drowning in Spring Creek; and to show them as harmless, likable criminals, she tells the story of their robbing a bank in
Alabama using a water gun instead of a real gun. The two bank robbers who grew up in south Georgia reach national notoriety when they escape from Alcatraz. Their official status is “presumed dead,” but because their bodies are never recovered, legends abound about their whereabouts. Supposedly post cards from them arrive from far-away places as Mexico and South America. Some local folks, though, are convinced the Anglins are much closer, hiding out in the south Georgia swamp:

Woman 3: They came back here. You know it. They always came back here.
Woman 1: They didn’t have anywhere else to go.
Woman 3: And lived down below the Sunday line, back in the swamps…
Woman 2: Man, I hear the Feds really didn’t get all the money, they just said that, and the brothers carry a wad of $100 bills big enough to choke a horse.
Woman 3: I hear they’re crack shots, shoot the ash off a cigarette at 100 yards, and nobody dares go back in there after them. (38)

With the humorous details, wild speculations, and sympathetic focus presented in The Rock and the Hard Place, Carson gives the Anglin Brothers legendary status and makes them true southern heroes.

Her other spine characters, the doctor in The Blue Doctor, the preacher in The Gospel Truth, and Miss Zula in Special Edition, are also the stuff of which legends are made. Unlike the Anglins, all three are historical, law-abiding citizens, whose contributions to the community in which they live and the longevity of their influence grant them local fame. The Blue Doctor is larger than life as the only source of healing, the one who can save the sick and injured and whose stories are repeated from one generation to the next. So after his death, the people of Colquitt and Miller County still remember him and talk about him. Likewise, the preacher achieves a larger-than-life reputation as he works to save souls through his dynamic, plate-hurling sermons. Miss Zula, on the other hand, has more than local fame, but she, like the Anglin brothers, is a recognized state and national figure. Documented as the first woman editor of a newspaper in the state of Georgia, some scholars maintain she may have been the first woman editor in the nation. Therefore, her accomplishments and memorable personality make her, along with the Anglins, the Blue Doctor, and the preacher, a prime candidate for Watson’s southern legendry.
With every word and action, Carson uses southern speech and creates local color, two more of Watson’s criteria for southern drama. In “Creative Expression and Regional Identity,” John Egerton quips, “They don’t have conferences on ‘The Mind of the North’” (*Alternate Roots* xi). He then admits he is not sure exactly what the mind of the South is, but he knows it has something to do with language: “There is something profound lurking in these wisteria-scented shadows, but I’ll be damned if I can put my finger on it – and neither can anyone else. Whatever it is, it has to do with language, with what the scholars call verbal facility (that’s people talking), porch talk, hearth talk, table talk, pillow talk” (*Alternate Roots* xi). He refers to the southerner’s “feel for language,” and claims “it is as much a part of our regional identity as any other element of our character, maybe more than any other” (*Alternate Roots* xiii). Carson’s “feel for language” is evident in all of her works, but especially in her Swamp Gravy plays. Just as Tennessee Williams “draws on one of the strongest traditions of southern culture: agrarianism,” Carson has her characters in the Swamp Gravy plays speak the language of the rural south (Watson 177). “I am too old to pussy foot around,” remarks Miss Zula, and later she asks her brother, Joe, “Well, my word, what’s got your goat?” (*Special Edition* 16, 21). In another scene from the same play, the school bully threatens another student with, “You show up, and I’ll nail your hide over the door” (*Special Edition* 22). Such references to livestock with “goat” and “hide” would not be found in urbanites’ language. Expressions that are native to the folks of Colquitt, Georgia, are the ones Carson uses in the Swamp Gravy plays, marking these works as distinctly southern in speech.

Egerton further explains southern theater as “regionally rooted stage productions filled with the self-conscious sense of history and humor and tragedy, the sense of place, that comforts and haunts and inspires just about every breathing soul who ever tarried here” (*Alternate Roots* xi). Jones says, “The prominent use of story in southern regional drama is often a form of what I call lyrical American stage realism, a dramatic form which ties character to place and time in a seamless rendition of action and dialogue that is based on reality but envelops the audience in the forever-questioning mysticism of life” (*Alternate Roots* xxiii). Carson achieves a sense of place in Swamp Gravy through the
stories she chooses to tell about the people of Colquitt and through the language she employs in writing the scenes, their own southern dialect.

It is “language with its great power of calling forth mind-pictures that transports the speaker (actor) and the listener (audience) into a panorama of thoughts – literally a landscape within the mind” (Jones xxii). Carson also reveals the lay of the land through the lines in the script. Sketches is filled with depictions of farm life in scenes such as “Cotton,” “Peanuts,” and “Mayhaws.” In “Batts Hammock,” a scene of mystery featured in The Blue Doctor, Good Medicine and The Rock and the Hard Place, the character evokes the swamp by providing rich details: “black water with cypress trees and alligators and all kinds of fish” in “a magical place with all the stuff blooming; it smelled like vanilla” (Good Medicine 2). Another effective infusion of local color that is place specific can be found in “Anglin Brothers I.” Clarence and J.W. Anglin talk about their escape from Alcatraz and how they “moved in down below the Sunday line,” which is explained as “so far back in the woods, the Grand Ole Opry don’t get down there till Sunday morning,” “down where the Flint and the Chattahoochee rivers converge, down in the swamps” (The Rock and the Hard Place 8-9). Such references capture the remoteness of those swamps in south Georgia.

Just as easily as she creates the land with her language, Carson can show life in action. “Dishwater Chicken” is a scene in which local color depends on the details given by the narrator. In this scene, a fussy preacher’s wife tells of her dinner at the home of a church member. With the mention of chicken and dumplings, sweet potatoes, and banana pudding, Carson shows what a southern meal is like. She also manages to include references to a tobacco spitting woman, a big red dog, a wood stove, and a porch, all details of local color. “Without a complex knowledge of one’s place, and without the faithfulness to one’s place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly and eventually destroyed,” warns Lerner (xvii). Through her writing for Swamp Gravy, Carson not only allows the audience to savor the sights and sounds of the South, she also helps Colquitt, Georgia, preserve its sense of place.

Jones says, “American theater and drama of the twenty-first century will be built on the Alternate Roots model – marked by a vitality of community, region, and people flowing out to the world – which is the only way any drama truly remains dynamic,
viable, alive” (xxv). The adage, “act local; think global,” is what Carson and the other
Alternate Roots playwrights attempt to do in their southern drama. Their plays are very
specific to the region as they are steeped in southern culture in terms of characters,
action, language, and setting, but the themes of the plays are universal. With the inclusion
of A Preacher with a Horse to Ride in the Alternate Roots anthology of southern drama,
Carson has been identified as a southern playwright, and her work with the Swamp Gravy
project continues this focus. In Sketches, The Blue Doctor, Good Medicine, The Gospel
Truth, Special Edition, and The Rock and the Hard Place, Jo Carson incorporates the
techniques of southern drama, particularly the device of storytelling, in the plays’
structures and includes the elements of southern drama through distinctive social types,
emphasis on violence and fundamentalist religion, and dependence on legendry, local
speech, and local color.
CHAPTER FIVE
A DASH OF FEMINISM

An example of oral history/storytelling, a kind of folklife play, and a bit of southern drama: Jo Carson’s community plays for Swamp Gravy are all of these things. However, they are also more. An infusion of feminism infiltrates the plays to give them a yet another perspective, but Carson does not think of herself as a feminist playwright. As Imelda Whelehan points out in Modern Feminist Thought, “A woman who is a liberal feminist might rarely define herself as a feminist, although she may be happy to declare her support of women’s equality in the workplace and in law” (23). Likewise, when Carson first saw a critical essay referring to her as a feminist playwright, she registered surprise. She then admitted that her texts may be construed as feminist but offered necessity as her excuse. “I agree with your premise that a lot of what I write is feminist – and I am one – but there are some odd reasons it shows up in the plays,” she explains (“Email,” March 13, 2005). Regardless of her motivation, Carson provides an added dimension to her Swamp Gravy plays through her brand of feminism, a mix of liberal feminism and radical feminism ideas. Jill Dolan in her 1993 book, Presence and Desire, discusses the development of these two kinds of feminism:

What began in the late 1960s as a grassroots political movement became through the 1970s, a political and ideological movement with organized impact and increasingly divergent strains. Networks such as the National Organization of Women, for example, developed strategies for influencing existing social and political systems around women’s issues. The liberal feminist movement generated by women within these organizations works to reform U.S. systems towards women’s equality.

Radical feminism, in contrast to the reformism of liberal feminism, theorized women’s oppression as systematic and began to analyze how patriarchal domination relegated women to the private sphere and alienated them from the power men wielded in public life. Radical feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s proposed that gender roles were socially constructed and could be changed only after a revolutionary restructurings of power. (45)
Another source says liberal feminism is concerned with “gender equality, gender stereotype and devaluation of women, division of labor in women’s jobs and men’s jobs, low pay for women’s jobs, restricted entry into top positions, lack of affordable child care for mothers who work outside the home, and limitations of abortion” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal-feminism). While Carson’s writing for Swamp Gravy does not attempt to reform or restructure society, the plays often question gender stereotypes and examine gender roles and identity, issues relevant to both liberal and radical feminism. Carson also gives voice to the women of Colquitt who might otherwise never be heard. Using a modified form of traditional Aristotellean drama, Carson is able to accomplish these feminist objectives in plays that are popular with audiences and casts.

It would be easy to explain away her feminist focus as merely an accommodation to Swamp Gravy’s disproportionate female cast. Carson says, “I have to write for women – not that I mind – there are always, ALWAYS [Carson’s capital letters] more women than men who come out for community performance endeavors, and I have to have more roles for women than men.” (“Email,” March 13, 2005). Director Richard Geer confirms the need: “There are three times as many women as men involved in community performances such as Swamp Gravy, and Jo listens to their stories and writes for them because she must” (“Gathering Mayhaws” 28). This number of females is certainly a practical consideration for Carson; however, it is not the only determiner of the stories she chooses for the scripts and the shape they take in the Swamp Gravy plays.

Her emphasis on the female rather than the traditional male story is no accident or mere necessity. Men have had powerful roles in community’s history. Both the town and the county are named after regional statesmen, Walter Colquitt and Andrew Miller, respectively. Colquitt also has its own share of war heroes, politicians, sheriffs, celebrity athletes, and land owners with name recognition that spans generations. The plays about this south Georgia community could have easily become the “Biographies of Great Men” Virginia Woolf describes in A Room of One’s Own, but they do not reenact the “history” of the town or tell about the lives of these well known men. Instead Carson chooses the stories of everyday people and writes scenes that often look at the roles of males and females in the community.

In the first play, Swamp Gravy Sketches, with its theme of work, Carson focuses
on the division of labor. She creates scenes about rural life, balancing the traditional male labor in farming with the female work of gathering mayhaws and cleaning house. However, even in the scenes about picking cotton and peanuts, she also features women, along with the men and children. Generally considered man’s work, the gathering of crops is depicted by Carson as it actually was before mechanization. On the family farm, all hands were needed to pick cotton, hoe peanut fields for weed control, and stack peanut vines for drying. Carson creates lines for both genders and all ages in the scenes, “Cotton” and “Peanuts,” thereby showing these labors as everybody’s work, not just men’s work. In “Mayhaws,” the scene written about gathering mayhaws and making jelly from them, Carson tells “her-story.” With only women and girls on stage, local females try to explain gathering mayhaws to a visitor unfamiliar with the process.

    STEPHANIE: Well, they’re berries.
    TAMMY: And they grow on bushes, and you go pick them.
    LEAH: Not exactly. They grow on trees.
    TAMMY: So you pick them like cherries.
    CHARLOTTE: Well, these trees have got stickers.
    TAMMY: So do berry canes.
    C: Let me re-phrase that: these trees have thorns. All over them. And the mayhaws grow at the top, so you don’t really pick mayhaws, at least nobody I know does; you collect what’s fallen off already.
    TAMMY: Oh, I see, some nice hot afternoon, you go out to the mayhaw tree in the backyard and pick up a few. No problem.
    REBECCA: Not exactly. Mayhaw trees grow in sinks called mayhaw ponds.
    TAMMY: Sinks. Kitchen sinks? Bathroom sinks?
    REBECCA: Limestone sinks. Holes in the ground. Water collects in them.
    LEAH: That’s not the only thing collects in them. You know the heat… Well, some of the critters that like it hot also like it wet.
    STEPHANIE: Water moccasins, cotton mouths…
    CHARLOTTE: Snakes (Sketches 30)

“Mayhaws” effectively illustrates that this task designated as women’s work is not an easy process and can even be a dangerous enterprise. Also with its multiple voices, the
scene shows the women’s knowledge of the land and their resourcefulness as they are able to extract juice from something as unlikely as the tart, almost inaccessible mayhaws and turn it into a delicious sweet jelly.

“Ghosts” is another scene in Sketches that highlights only females. Carson writes a dialogue between an African American as storyteller and a white woman as listener. The scene re-creates an actual Swamp Gravy story-gathering session between Sally Warren and Sara Ann Keaton. Their conversation is about Sally’s dead parents coming to visit her in her dreams. She says of her mother, “She visited me twice. The first time she visited me, I was afraid of her, and the next time she visited me, I tried to touch her, but I couldn’t touch her, and it was a voice told me that morning, ‘If you don’t pray and serve the Lord, you won’t ever touch,’ and so she didn’t never come back to see me no more” (Sketches 20). This central scene between Sally and Sara Ann serves to validate woman as storyteller while being a moment of metatheater with Swamp Gravy referencing itself and documenting the importance of women in the storygathering process.

Other examples from Sketches of stories about females with only females in the scenes are “Red-Headed Woman,” a girl’s nightmare of being buried alive, and “Lydia E. Pinkum,” two girls’ conversation about starting their periods. Both of these humorous pieces allow young females to take center stage and tell very personal stories. In “Red-Headed Woman,” a teen recounts a horror story that has haunted her since her childhood. She says a woman died, and then later her body was exhumed. When the casket was opened, she supposedly had her hands clutched in her long red hair, and her mouth was frozen in a scream, sure signs that she was buried alive. The storyteller then explains to the audience how she is going to avoid such a terrible fate. She will be buried with a telephone, just in case she gets buried alive. Although the story has the young woman admit her fears, it also shows a form of self-actualization. Her creative problem-solving gets a laugh from the audience, and the female teen has her moment alone in the spotlight. There are no such scenes in Sketches for solitary males of any age.

In “Lydia E. Pinkum,” Carson once again highlights young female teens. This scene is about the patent medicine by that name and two girls’ discovery of it and womanhood. Two friends candidly discuss starting their periods and complain of menstrual cramps, rather bold dialogue for Swamp Gravy in its 1989 south Georgia
setting. The girls find their mothers’ Lydia E. Pinkum, almost pure alcohol in content, offers relief from their monthly pain, and they help themselves to the tonic until one of them overhears her mother say, “Oh, I stopped taking it because I hear there’s a baby in every bottle” (Special Edition 6). The daughter runs to tell her friend: “Now I don’t know who’s going to have this baby, but one or the other of us is bound to have got it” (Special Edition 6). Thinking they are going to have a baby because they drank the tonic, both girls bemoan their fate, with one exclaiming, “My father is going to kill me” (Special Edition 6). Then the two try to come up with solutions to the problem:

   Girl 2: We talked
   Girl 1: about running away from home and where we could go
   Girl 2: Don’t you wish we were boys? We could go down to the railroad track and jump a train, and go out west and be cowboys, and ride horses, and not tell anybody our real names, and never come back, and nobody’d ever know we had a baby…
   Girl 1: If we were boys, we wouldn’t need to jump a train. (Special Edition 6)

Toril Moi says, “Over the past decade, feminists have used the terms ‘feminist,’ ‘female,’ and ‘feminine’ in a multitude of different ways,” and differentiates the terms thusly: “’feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness,’ as a matter of biology, and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (104). In “Lydia E. Pinkum,” Carson addresses all three of Moi’s terms as the dialogue between the girls accomplishes several objectives: (1) it foregrounds female friendships; (2) it offers a natural discussion about female sexuality and pregnancy; (3) it provides a commentary about a patriarchal society as the girls worry about the reaction of their fathers; (4) and it examines gender roles in how boys and girls deal with an unwanted pregnancy. The female’s body advertises her predicament and forces acknowledgment of the pregnancy, but a male who does not carry the child can “jump a train” or walk away from the problem if he chooses. Through Carson’s scene, the audience with viewers of both genders and all ages listens to the girls talk about a subject that could be offensive in a mixed group. Yet, “Lydia E. Pinkum” succeeds in representing all three of Moi’s levels of feminist, female, and feminine because Carson treats the topic humorously with her choice of innocent young girls as spokespersons. The playwright may not have willfully set out to foreground females in
Sketches, but the scenes cited show that the she ends up doing so in the final script by highlighting women’s work, relationships, and rites of passage.

While Swamp Gravy Sketches is a series of loosely related stories, Carson’s other plays contain a central character to unify a variety of stories on the same theme, and in these her subsequent works, feminism is not apparent. In fact, her next two plays appear to tell “his-story” as Woolf’s “biographies of great men” show up in The Blue Doctor, later altered to become Good Medicine, and The Gospel Truth. Centering on the stories of strong males, one a doctor and the other a preacher, Carson appears to opt for male driven narratives. Both of these characters represent community leaders, and their stories are important ones to tell. So there is nothing unusual about her choice of subject; it is the way Carson tells the men’s stories that makes these two plays feminist in nature.

In The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine, Carson creates a male composite character to represent several doctors practicing medicine in the county over a hundred-year span. In the hands of the playwright, the male-centered tale becomes subtly subverted, and its narrative destiny detours. Rather than allow the doctor to tell his own story, Carson uses his daughter as the narrative voice. She filters the interaction of the doctor with patients and also provides the pertinent psychological and biographical information about her father. For instance, in the scene, “Blue Doctor One,” the doctor has to tell someone he has lockjaw. “Lockjaw. From a rusty nail that’s come in contact with animal feces. You likely won’t live through it. I’m sorry,” he says to the patient (Good Medicine 7-8). The doctor bluntly breaks this bad news and delivers a death sentence with no visible emotion. It is the next lines, belonging to the daughter, that reveal how he really feels about such hopeless cases. She confides to the audience, “Sometimes he came home in the middle of the day and went to bed, and nobody was to bother him unless it was an emergency, and I know it was for something he’d had to tell somebody earlier in the day” (Good Medicine 8). She also admits he wears a lot of after-shave lotion to cover up the smell of sickness and death he encounters daily. The daughter’s words let the audience see the human side of the doctor. Without her voice to explain his emotional distress over his patients, the Blue Doctor would appear totally lacking in compassion. Her lines about his vulnerability add dimension to his character and make him much more sympathetic to the audience.
The daughter’s words give the audience insight into his physical appearance as well. “My father wasn’t a very big man, but he had the most amazing hands, little, almost delicate, sort of fragile looking but so strong,” is her description of him that once again depicts him with a soft side not seen elsewhere in the actions of the doctor (Good Medicine 6). She offers the explanation for the title of the play, too: “Once, he had some kind of throat infection, and he painted his own throat with silver nitrate – they used it for strep and some other things – but he was allergic to it, and for the rest of his life after that, he got a blue tinge to his skin every time he spent time in the sun. He was known around here as the blue doctor” (Good Medicine 6). Her explanation of his condition not only points to the play’s title but also serves to illustrate the Blue Doctor’s fallibility. When he tried to doctor on himself, he was not successful, and the daughter’s words develop complexity of character and give the audience further insight into the doctor. She divulges his weaknesses.

While the daughter adds these layers of psychological and physical depth to the doctor’s character, she allows the audience to laugh at him, too. She shares comical stories about him that move the doctor further from a stereotype into a more well-rounded character. Without her insertion of tales about his hunting and fishing trips, the doctor would be seen only at work. Her anecdote about him and his friends setting out to dynamite some fish and having the dog bring back the lit stick of dynamite to them shows a lighter side of the doctor. The choice of story also humanizes the doctor as he is seen willing to participate in an illegal enterprise with his friends. Another anecdote reveals that it is hard for the doctor to leave his profession at the office. Sometimes he just wants to be left alone. The daughter tells about her father pretending to be a Russian, so he won’t have to answer any medical questions when on an outing with male friends. She says, “… the friend told the waitress Daddy was a Russian and did not speak the English language. And the waitress said, ‘He sure is an ugly little son of a bitch, isn’t he?’ Thinking Daddy couldn’t understand, you know” (Good Medicine 9). Both of the daughter’s funny stories about her father provide the audience with relief from the serious medical stories and act to develop the doctor’s character. Hers is a very important function in the play.

Since male characters are already a part of this play, Carson could have easily had
them tell the doctor’s story. The narrative voice could have been one of doctor’s male friends or the doctor himself. In this instance, the playwright’s choice was definitely not mandated by a shortage of men. Instead, she assigns these lines throughout the play to the daughter’s character, moving her to a prominent position as storyteller. Carson also demonstrates her feminism by having the daughter tell typically male stories of hunting and fishing. Generally southern men, not the women, are known for sharing tales about their fishing and hunting exploits. Therefore, the playwright challenges gender roles just by her choice of the daughter as the narrator for these anecdotes.

When Carson edits and expands The Blue Doctor for another season, her feminism is much more visible. In her second version of this play called Good Medicine, she weaves in the story of a woman healer with that of the male doctor. Now the doctor has two females to contend with for the audience’s attention. Along with the daughter’s undercutting of his authority with her personal insights, he has competition in his profession. While he is shown frenetically going around trying to cure his patients’ medical problems, the woman healer in contrast is just calmly talking to them about their needs. Carson also relegates the doctor’s stories to only Act One, editing down the first play but retaining the daughter’s narration. There are no scenes about the Healer in Act One, only references to her at the end of the act when a child addresses the Questioner, the character in the play who is doing research on folk medicine. The exchange is as follows:

Child: My mother said tell you something. She said the doctor is really smart and good, but he can’t believe in praying for cures and laying on hands and stuff like that ‘cause he’s a doctor, and she said there is a person here you ought to meet.

Questioner: I’m afraid I’m not much of one for that stuff either. I’m an academic, I’m looking for folk cures, herbal remedies.

Child: Mother said I should take you and meet her. You want to?

Questioner: Not ……

Child: She’s gonna be in the second act.

Questioner: Ok. I’ll go. (Good Medicine 22)

As the child quotes her mother, she introduces the character, the Healer, to the audience
and leads her listeners to believe the Healer has special powers. The implication is that the Healer’s way is even better than the doctor’s. Closing out the doctor’s stories in Act One, Carson saves her woman Healer scenes for Act Two, thereby literally giving the female the last word over the Blue Doctor in Good Medicine.

The penultimate scene in each play involves a strong woman. Although the focus in The Blue Doctor and Good Medicine is on curing or healing medical problems, Carson inserts stories of death near the end of the plays. The person is not saved by modern medicine or faith healing; in The Blue Doctor a young mother dies in childbirth, and in Good Medicine, a man suffers a fatal heart attack. In The Blue Doctor’s “Story of Stories,” a pregnant woman preempts the doctor completely. In fact, this scene makes no direct reference to the Blue Doctor at all. To frame this fable of healing and helping, Carson employs three generations of women. The narrator for the story is the character of the adult woman remembering an incident from her childhood. This performer is actually sharing her own family story, her grandmother’s story, which turns a powerful moment on stage into the literal mass transmission of a story. “Mama’s hands were never idle so as she talked she patched Papa’s corn wallet and crocheted a piece of lace. She told us stories,” are the narrator’s first words, immediately establishing the mother as master storyteller (The Blue Doctor 41). The daughter learns about mortality through the mother’s first story and about community in her second story.

The children are gathered at the mother’s feet to listen as she tells a story of sacrifice. In her first tale of adventure or quest, a young boy is tending sheep, and as he tries to help a sheep in trouble, he falls. The children are certain the hero will survive, that their mother could not possibly be telling them a story without a happy ending. “He does die,” she says quietly (The Blue Doctor 41). The mother uses this story to prepare the children for her own impending death in childbirth, and she softens the ending of her story about the boy by telling them the boy’s “spirit returns as a light to help guide others on their way” (The Blue Doctor 41). The implication is that, after her death, their memory of her will do the same for them.

In the mother’s second tale, a story about being generous and sharing precious water in a dipper, she provides another lesson about sacrifice. “Diamond Dipper” teaches the children that “whatever you give away comes back to you tenfold” (136). Trinh
Minh-ha calls Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Storyteller,” “an example of multiple storytelling in which story and life merge, the story being as complex as life and life being as simple as a story” (143-144). Carson creates that same dynamic on stage. “To preserve is to pass on, not to keep for oneself,” says Minh-ha (134). In Carson’s “Story of Stories,” the lesson to live by is passed on not only to the daughter but also to all listeners in the audience; subsequently, one woman’s story to her children becomes a community’s parable. The scene, “Story of Stories,” should set up the final scene of the play in which the doctor dies; however, it has mythic proportions and pathos all on its own. Rather than introduce the last scene, it seems at the very least an equal companion piece. In the last scene of the play, as a final tribute to the woman as storyteller, Carson has the doctor’s daughter tell about his sudden death from a heart attack. The audience experiences his death from her point of view, as an event in her life, as her loss, balancing the mother-daughter connection of “Story of Stories” with a father-daughter link in the final Blue Doctor scene.

In Good Medicine, it is the female healer or the Woman who upstages the doctor, again highlighting the strength and power of women. The Blue Doctor has the knowledge and the action, but she possesses insight and wisdom. Both are memorable characters, but Carson makes her the one likely to be pondered over. As Act Two opens, a child directs the Questioner to the Woman. He confronts her in the following exchange:

Questioner: Are you the healer?
Woman: Lord, no.
Questioner: Do you do faith healing?
Woman: I am a minister of faith.
Questioner: Do you cure people who are sick?
Woman: I don’t cure anything. Curing and healing are very different, not the same at all. Curing is science, healing is emotional.
Questioner: What is in your satchel? Kleennex for the ones who cry?
Woman: Stories. At the moment. But the satchel is also good as a carry-on bag. Fits under the seat or in the overhead compartment.
Questioner: Heavy load for a bunch of papers.
Woman: There is no paper, the stories are not written down.
Questioner: What are the stories about?
Woman: How to live and how to die.
Questioner: Why would you carry around stories about how to die?
Woman: Everybody is going to do it, every living thing on this earth dies and part of healing is accepting that. (Good Medicine 27)

In the subsequent scenes that feature the female healer, the Woman is both storyteller and listener. While the Blue Doctor rushes around trying to save his patients’ lives, the Woman faces the interrogations of the Questioner calmly and with good humor. The Questioner says he is gathering folk remedies, yet he seems to seek understanding from her. He asks her what to do for cancer, and she gives him a list of ways to live life, not how to treat cancer. When the Questioner tries to pin her down by asking, “What do you call what you’re doing?” she responds enigmatically:

Woman: I don’t try to name it. I’m telling you, your body has its own knowledge, a knowledge of the universe because it is of the stuff of the universe and not separate from it, do you hear that? Your wonderful rational mind says I, I, I, “I think, therefore, I am.” I think, therefore, I can collect cures; I think, therefore I can learn how to solve problems. And so you can, but you can also think yourself into isolated miserable corners, and you can worry yourself very, very sick with that same wonderful mind. Your body knows other, older connections with things beyond your rational knowledge. Healing is finding, re-learning if the truth is spoken, those other connections. And faith in a power greater than your own is part of it. So find some way to believe.

Questioner: And your part? What is your part?
Woman: To help with the baggage. That’s all. (Good Medicine 34-35)

Through the female healer’s words, Carson gives the Questioner and the audience plenty to contemplate. The strong Woman character created by the playwright not only challenges the Blue Doctor’s male-dominated world of medicine but endorses spiritual rather than physical healing.

Along with the female faith healer, other women’s stories fill Act Two of Good Medicine. There are ten scenes, three of which feature the Woman and five others which are narrated by women. That leaves only two stories with male characters, and both of
these are preacher stories, one about a minister praying over a dying church member who is miraculously healed after the prayer and the other about a boy practicing his sermons in the woods in preparation for the ministry. “The Cap” is one woman telling the story of an old woman known for laying on hands who is able to help the narrator’s grieving father mourn the death of his son and her brother. “Hands” is a very modern story about Karen Kimbrel, former executive director and Swamp Gravy cast member who falls during a rehearsal and feels her pain lift as fellow Swampers join hands around her. Then from her own personal experience, Carson writes the scene, “Moped.” Her story is about her knee injury being healed by laying on of hands. In contrast to these pieces of successful healings,

“Burn” is about lasting scars. This females-only scene is the dark story of Good Medicine as the narrator tells of her stepmother’s attempt to kill her by setting fire to a tree with her in it. Although it paints a very negative portrait of the stepmother, it is a powerful scene with two memorable female characters, one of which is the villain and the other the admirable heroine. In fact, Carson leaves the audience with the image of the injured girl, now a mother herself, ministering to the needs of her evil stepmother. She has the scars from the burns, yet she still chooses to feed the woman who caused her enormous physical pain and psychological anguish. The implication is the stepmother is old now and can no longer look after herself; she is dependent on the stepchild that she harmed and tried to kill. The poignant last line of the scene as the stepdaughter takes responsibility for her stepmother is, “Come on, old woman! Come on out here. Get your dinner while it’s hot!” (Good Medicine 42). This harsh story near the end of the play presents the narrator in a positive light as she serves someone who certainly does not deserve her kindness. The scene moves women to center stage, shows female strength, and showcases woman as storyteller. As the narrator shares her story, her on-stage listener is her daughter, so the narrator is passing on her story, not only to the audience, but to the next female generation as well. All can learn from the experience of this powerful woman. The focus on the mother-daughter relationship can also be seen as a feminist element.

“Burn” is followed immediately by “Quartet” in which another female narrator is the person who takes action. The climactic scene in Good Medicine presents the story of
a gospel group composed of a female nurse and three male members with the nurse narrating the events. One of the quartet members suffers a heart attack during a performance in a little country church. This man has a pre-existing heart condition when he auditions for the quartet, and the others are naturally concerned about his health. He assures them, “I’ve had four heart attacks, and my doctor tells me if I have another one, I won’t survive it, and I’ve actually prayed that when I die, I want to be playing the guitar, and I want to be playing gospel music” (Good Medicine 44). He joins the group, and one night several months later, he does have another heart attack. As the only person with the medical knowledge, the nurse tries desperately to resuscitate her friend. “I was the only one in that whole crowded little church who knew how to do it, and it is hard to do, and it was a long time waiting for an ambulance to come that far out in the county. And he died,” she tells the audience (Good Medicine 43).

In this final scene, it is this nurse, not the Blue Doctor, who has to deal with the life-and-death situation. “I did what I knew how to do, and I did the best I knew how to do it, but there is a time when everything you know to do doesn’t fix it,” she says (Good Medicine 43). In spite of the futility of her efforts, the nurse does not end the scene with despair. The female character talks about the inevitability of death, a theme that has been driving Carson’s works since her children’s book, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You; her final remarks then give her monologue its positive thrust. She delivers the play’s summary statement about how to live and how to die that echoes the earlier message of the Woman (healer) to the Questioner. The nurse says the heart attack victim died doing what he wanted to do. “He even got the song he wanted to go out on. Not everybody gets that much, and I’m glad he did, I’m glad we could give it to him,” she concludes (Good Medicine 43). To use a woman to once again tell a man’s story when there are men cast in the scene seems to be the deliberate choice of a playwright who is looking at gender roles and celebrating women’s strengths. Also the cliché, “Is there a doctor in the house,” is subverted as the would-be rescuer is a woman, not a man, and a nurse, not a doctor, trying to use her CPR knowledge to save the life of her fellow musician. In “Quartet,” through the telling of a different story, the nurse arrives at the same truths as the mother in “Story of Stories,” but to these she adds the biblical mandate: “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good” (Ecclesiastes 2:24).
Her story in *Good Medicine* is not really about death; it is about the need for community and about the enjoyment of one’s work as an indicator of a life well lived. In *The Blue Doctor* and *Good Medicine*, the male doctor runs around diagnosing diseases, setting bones, and sucking out rattlesnake venom and, thereby, displaying his medical knowledge and prowess; in her feminist fashion, Carson has the Woman (the female healer) in *Good Medicine* and two other women characters in the last scenes of *The Blue Doctor* and *Good Medicine* simply speak wisdom. Carson may insist she is no feminist, but the narrative voices in these two scripts indicate otherwise.

Similar to the plays about medicine, *The Gospel Truth* only appears to feature a strong male in stories about religion while it really foregrounds females. Carson brings together a hellfire and brimstone preacher and a fire-prone preacher in a composite male character that the audience comes to know mostly through the words of his daughter. However, in the opening scene, it is the preacher’s mother that Carson writes as the hero. People on stage are standing around discussing a fire when the Mother’s voice is heard off stage. “My son, where’s my boy?” she screams (*The Gospel Truth* 2). With others forming a bucket brigade, she is the one who rushes into the blaze itself to rescue her son. A male character later admonishes her: “You showed a great deal of courage, ma’am, but if you’d just told one of us…Your dress could have caught… (*The Gospel Truth* 2). The distraught mother rebukes him with her next words: “Don’t but me, this is my baby. Get me something, get me water. Give me your bucket” (*The Gospel Truth* 2). So Carson immediately introduces a powerful female character and has the mother perform the act of bravery while the male, who is more concerned about her shed burning or even her clothing catching on fire than about the child, stands by commenting on her actions.

As the crowd of people is gathered around the child and the mother, one person steps away from the group and begins the preacher’s life story. It is his daughter. “This was my father’s first incidence with fire. He was three…He had no memory of being pulled from those flames, but he was to rise from flames again and again in his life,” she confides, setting up the theme of fire for the play (*The Gospel Truth* 2). The daughter then jumps to the marriage of her parents and how her father as a young man was “given to some wild living” before he became a preacher (*The Gospel Truth* 2). She also introduces his conversion story, which has been prompted by his nightmare of fire. “My
love, I looked at hell last night,” are the preacher’s first words in the play as he tells his young wife about his dream of fire. Throughout The Gospel Truth, Carson will have his lines focus on his relationship with God and delegate the responsibility of revealing aspects of his personal life to the daughter. He is his sermons. She, on the other hand, is the judge of his life and controlling voice of the narrative. Like “Story of Stories” in The Blue Doctor, The Gospel Truth had special meaning for the performer cast as the preacher’s daughter. She shared her own father’s story with the playwright and then was chosen perform as herself. As the scenes unfold in the play, they alternate between her narrating the preacher’s life story and his delivering sermons based on the Ten Commandments.

In addition to establishing the preacher’s mother as hero and his daughter as narrator, Carson creates other substantive roles for women in her Ten Commandments’ stories. Throughout the play, the preacher draws attention to each commandment either with a brief sermon or by merely calling out the commandment. As he booms out the commandment, he dramatically breaks a plate to symbolically illustrate the breaking of God’s law. The shattering of the plate is the introduction to an independent scene which relates to the commandment. While “Graven Image” and “Name in Vain” have women in their cast, “Keep the Sabbath Holy,” “Bear False Witness,” “Adultery,” “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” “Honor,” and “Covet” are scenes showcasing only female performers who tell women’s stories.

“Graven Image” features a sister/brother duo reminiscing about the discomforts of the worship service. “You weren’t supposed to yawn, and if you went to sleep, you were in trouble,” says the sister, and the brother comes back with a memory of his own (The Gospel Truth 7). In the back-and-forth dialogue, they recall hard pews, their mother’s hand gestures, cough codes, uncomfortable church clothes, and growling stomachs. To conclude their segment of the scene, the brother and sister witness two teens thumbing through a hymnal, reading titles followed by “between the sheets.” As the sister acts scandalized and says, “We didn’t do…,” her brother assures her they did: “Oh, yes, we did. ‘Just As I Am’ between the sheets” (The Gospel Truth 8). The sister concludes their part of the scene with her denial: “I certainly don’t remember doing that” (The Gospel Truth 8), giving her the last word over her brother.
The next scene, “Name in Vain,” is about a man who takes the Lord’s name in vain, but women tell his story to illustrate the power of prayer. There is a drought, and one woman organizes an afternoon prayer meeting to pray for rain. When the church ladies ask one man to join in the effort, he says, “If you get a rain, I’ll get a blankety-blank good shower out of it” (The Gospel Truth 11). The women are horrified by his blasphemy. Then one woman assures the audience that it doesn’t always “rain on the just and the unjust” as Bible says; in this man’s case “the rain stopped at his fence line. And her crops made that summer, and her neighbor had to buy corn to feed his livestock” (The Gospel Truth 11). Through Carson’s writing with a feminist edge, the spiritual power of the righteous church ladies triumphs over the unbelieving man.

In “Keep the Sabbath Holy,” “Bear False Witness,” and “Adultery,” Carson uses only women to illustrate these commandments and also to add humor to the play. “Keep the Sabbath Holy” is a mother-daughter dialogue about an aunt fond of Carmen Miranda hats and too much white face powder. Their story of the aunt and her little husband, a man so small he could sit under her huge hat with her, makes the audience laugh. In spite of her idiosyncrasies, the aunt, now on her eighth husband that “she got from a mail, M, A, L, E, mail order catalogue,” is still depicted as a steadfast church-goer who kept up her part of the “Amen” corner (The Gospel Truth 13-14). In preparation for this play, many stories were gathered about devout people who were in church every Sunday, but Carson chooses this particular story of a female who always kept the Sabbath holy and uses two other females to tell her story and act out the part of the aunt and her little husband. Admittedly, the aunt’s penchant for too many husbands, too big hats, and too much make-up make her very attractive to a playwright such as Carson who cannot resist infusing humor in her work and who always strives to create unusual and memorable characters. With the aunt’s character, Carson creates a flawed, yet faithful female church-goer, adding balance as well as humor in her portrayal of women.

“Bear False Witness,” another woman’s story; is a candid, amusing look at the preacher’s wife and not the preacher. And, yes, Carson lets the wife tell her own story while the preacher’s daughter narrates his. This prim and proper woman has to eat Sunday dinner in the home of her husband’s church members and is appalled by the fare and the lack of cleanliness. She describes the main course as “chicken and dumplings in
what looked like dishwater” (Gospel Truth 31). Because the preacher’s wife has a weak stomach, she decides to “bear false witness” or tell a lie by faking a fainting spell to avoid having to eat the nauseating meal. Both her resourcefulness and untruthfulness give the audience another woman’s story to enjoy. By creating a lying preacher’s wife who only pretends to faint, Carson challenges the stereotype of a preacher’s wife as a quiet, saintly woman. Carson’s preacher’s wife is on no pedestal; the playwright presents a portrait of a very real woman complete with a petty and persnickety nature.

In Gospel Truth the scene used to depict “thou shalt not commit adultery” is probably Carson’s most overtly feminist scene. This story of a man “tomcattin’” around on his wife receives an unexpected treatment by Carson as she uses three women as the storytellers. “Some man is going to tell a funny story about another man, and the men are going to laugh, and the women are going to sit there with that look on their faces,” observes one woman (The Gospel Truth 17). Another woman then suggests, “So what if we tell the story?” (The Gospel Truth 17). Carson has the three women act out the story, which features three men: one committing adultery, one unwillingly aiding the adulterer, and one trying to kill the adulterer. What could have been a male brag fest with women portrayed as nothing more than sexual objects becomes instead a satire of male infidelity. As the women use facial expressions and body language to take this scene to almost a slapstick level, they are convincing in their roles as the men in the story. Their tale ends with an ironic twist as the cheating man becomes the victim when he is almost shot by his lover’s husband. Also his wife gets the last laugh and the last lines. Carson closes the scene with the remorseful husband humbled and Miss Bessie, his wife, respected. “I got news for him. I got news for all of them. Miss Bessie likes chocolates just fine, but she is losing her taste for sowbelly, and they better make note of it” (The Gospel Truth 20).

With the women usurping the roles of the men and telling a story that the men would be more inclined to share, Carson employs a feminist perspective. Biblically, it is the woman who is associated with adultery. When the angry mob brings a woman to Jesus to be stoned to death, her accusers claim she was caught in the act of adultery, yet there is no mention of her partner. Later Nathaniel Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter, his classic work on this sin, identifies Hester Prynne as the adulteress and leaves her lover’s identity unknown until the end of his novel. For Carson to have the male disclosed as the
wrong-doer is a different approach. Also the audience never sees or hears from the other
woman, the cheating husband’s partner in sin; the only woman character discussed is his
wife, who is, of course, presented as a sympathetic character. The wife, however, does
not evoke pity from the audience. The last lines by the women narrators point to the
wife’s awareness of her husband’s infidelity and her unwillingness to continue to docilely
accept his actions. “Adultery” by Carson is a most interesting treatment of an old story,
and it is her feminist voice that gives this scene its freshness.

Three other scenes, “Honor,” “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” and “Covet,” have all female
casts with Carson taking a serious look at these commandments through the experiences
of women. The monologue, “Honor,” focuses on the biblical mandate for children to
honor their fathers and mothers. To write this scene, Carson relies on the story of an
African American woman’s decision to care for her dying mother who had abandoned
her in childhood. “She didn’t keep me, but it’s her has to settle with God about that. I
kept her ‘cause the Lord said to, said to in the Commandments,” the now grown woman
reasons (The Gospel Truth 16). Here Carson again spotlights a woman’s story, and for
the first time in her writing for Swamp Gravy, she chooses a woman of color to make the
audience think about this commandment and what motherhood means. The writer adds
another level of complexity as she also questions the “mammy” stereotype in the African
American community. Patricia Hill Collins observes that “African-American women
need an Afrocentric feminist analysis that debunks the image of ‘happy slave,’ whether
the white-male-created ‘matriarch’ or the Black-male-perpetuated ‘superstrong Black
mother,’” and Carson provides that analysis (39). Her depiction of African American
motherhood is neither stereotypical or flattering; it is, however, honest and true to the oral
history of Colquitt native, Clara Toliver. In her monologue, the daughter (Clara) who is
able to overcome mother abandonment, abusive husbands, and economic deprivation
presents herself as a woman of principle -- a black woman of principle. On stage in the
Deep South with a predominantly white audience, Carson projects a positive portrait of a
strong black woman, so “Honor” is an important step for Swamp Gravy in its
representation of African American women. While Carson focuses on African American
womanhood in a realistic but positive way, however, her only mention of black males
comes with the narrator’s references to her physically abusive husbands. The playwright
makes no attempt to provide a strong African American male counterpart to the narrator, and the black woman speaks for herself in “Honor.” In scene after scene, Carson provides such stories of female empowerment.

“Thou Shalt Not Steal” starts with several short, funny stories about stealing that feature multiple cast members. It ends with a monologue about an elderly woman who admits she runs out of money before the end of the month and steals from the grocery store to make ends meet. “I put the inexpensive items in my buggy and the more expensive ones in my pocket,” she confesses, adding, “Now I don’t take much” (The Gospel Truth 30). In the oral histories of Colquitt, there are innumerable stories of petty theft and a few of grand larceny. Carson could have chosen to write a male’s story to illustrate this commandment. National and local statistics are clearly in favor of males as prospective thieves. However, instead of creating a straight-forward piece about the evils of stealing with a predictable male perpetrator, Carson problematizes the issue by using a woman, and worse still, an old poor woman. Is it really stealing if it is based on need? “I don’t take much, and I don’t take things I don’t need, and I know stealing is a sin, but having all that when somebody else needs it is a sin, too, isn’t it?” asks the old woman (The Gospel Truth 30). From her earliest published work, stories I ain’t told nobody yet, Carson has been concerned with social issues, especially those plaguing women as they face poverty and physical abuse. In the old woman’s monologue at the end of “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” Carson reminds the audience that poverty still exists in America and that the plight of the elderly, the forgotten poor in this country, has not been addressed. She leaves the listeners to ponder this reality and offers the opportunity for them to examine their own notions of morality as she presents this sympathetic portrait of a woman in need. Carson prefers stories that are not obvious or easy, and the story of the old woman’s theft examines the sin of stealing without absolutism while it also foregrounds women in poverty.

In The Gospel Truth’s last scene about the Ten Commandments, Carson takes the sin of coveting and uses it to tell another story about women. The audience does not hear a scene about coveting the property of others; that which is coveted in this case is the body of a young female. “Covet” is about the molestation of young girls by a church deacon. With her choice of the deacon, Carson compounds the man’s sin of coveting with
his hypocrisy. She also further complicates the situation by having some of the women admit they wanted the presents that the molester offers them in exchange for the liberties he takes with their bodies. Carson could have written a scene about one young female abused by an older male, a figure of authority in her life, and it would have been predictable. However, unlike most of the stories in the play which come from taped interviews, this story came to Carson as two written accounts submitted anonymously to Swamp Gravy by two different people. Because of the obvious need these women had to tell this particular story, the playwright combined their two similar experiences into one chilling scene. “Jo conceived it as a dialogue between two selves of the injured teller: the secretly wounded child and her adult self, redeemed through utterance,” explains Swamp Gravy director, Richard Geer (“Gathering Mayhaws” 25).

Presented on stage polyphonically, the story becomes a Greek chorus of thirteen females spanning six decades who relive the horrendous childhood traumas. “The community of these thirteen girls and women hated the scene and insisted it be done,” remembers the director (“Gathering Mayhaws” 26). “What did he covet?” asks the first woman (The Gospel Truth 35). “He would watch me when I passed his house,” replies a younger female, and “Come here, little girl,” is the next line with adult female voices sounding like the man (The Gospel Truth 35). Then the audience hears the seemingly unconnected, “No. Don’t do that again,” from another girl followed by the women’s “Come over here, little girl, I’ve got a present for you” (The Gospel Truth 35). The repetition of “come here, little girl,” delivered by the four older women with lowered, male-sounding voices is unnerving. It is the younger performers who remember the presents offered in exchange for touching their bodies: “a doll with an eye poked out,” and a quarter, with the accompanying lines, “I had never had a quarter of my own before. I coveted the quarter” (The Gospel Truth 36).

The molester is dead before the females can talk about the abuse. The setting for “Covet” in The Gospel Truth is his funeral. Perhaps, they have failed to speak up earlier because they felt complicit. Since they coveted his gifts, they share the guilt. It is apparent the women have remained silent throughout his life, thereby allowing the pattern of abuse to continue with other victims. In spite of their lack of action earlier, his death should at least bring them some relief and release, but it does not stop the awful
memories. “Forty years in the wilderness,” is the women’s bleak ironic biblical refrain at his funeral (The Gospel Truth 38). Through her script Carson seems to offer healing to those wounded little girls still present in the women’s psyches; she also extends solace to those females in the audience who may have had similar traumas. To witness the scene is discomforting and disturbing, but the separate voices speak community, not isolation. Through the presentation of a chorus, Carson joins the women on stage and in the audience into a common memory of pain and eases the psychological wounding. This female community of storytelling in “Covet” can serve a catharsis for both female performers and female listeners.

Carson repeatedly gives voice to women’s stories in The Blue Doctor, Good Medicine, and The Gospel Truth. After these earlier seemingly male-centered scripts, the Swamp Gravy production committee members (all women except for the director) who guide Carson in subject selection said it was time for a female central character. To accomplish this goal, for the first time interviewers targeted specific people, resulting in many stories about strong women. Carson gleaned from the material one woman’s life story to serve as the spine. Ironically, the first historical character to be staged by Swamp Gravy is not the expected patriarch of the community, but a woman, Zula Brown Toole. She is the founding editor of the local newspaper, the Miller County Liberal.

For the first time in a Swamp Gravy play, Carson moves a woman’s story to the primary position, and, unlike her male predecessors, the doctor and the preacher, the pioneer journalist in Special Edition does get to narrate her own story. She explains her motivation for starting a newspaper, and also for the first time, Carson creates an individual rather than a composite character. The spine of Miss Zula presents the single story of a heroic woman, hooks together stories about other strong women, and also raises questions about gender stereotypes. Several pieces in the play look at the traditional roles of wife and mother. The editor’s own courtship comes to life on stage; as a young widow with a small child, she weds more out of convenience than love. Even though she has one child of her own, inherits three stepchildren, and produces three more children out of this second union, Miss Zula does not stay home and enjoy motherhood. Carson has her at her typewriter composing or out in the community gathering news or subscriptions. Practically an unheard of phenomenon in her 1897 world, Miss Zula has a
In contrast to the editor’s story as a business woman and journalist, three other scenes are more typical of what it means to be a woman in a small, rural southern town. In her discussion of several “women-centered novels, Rosalind Coward observes that the Victorian novel “increasingly featured the movement towards marriage as the centrally significant event of the narrative” and for Jane Austen in particular “marriage represents the establishment of certain social values” (27). Zula Toole founded her newspaper in 1906, at a time when Victorian mores still held on. The only goal for most women during Miss Zula’s era was to get married and have children. In the scenes, “Secret Marriage” and the more ironic “Fun,” Carson acknowledges this cultural imperative. The pretty, young socialite of “Secret Marriage” has at least four beaus dangling, each eager to make her his bride. Appearing on different staging areas at the same time, a teenager acts out the scene while the narrator, her old age counterpart, offers commentary. It is an interesting device by Carson, allowing that simultaneous double look at womanhood in youth and old age. The older woman gives the audience the opportunity to see what this pretty, vain young woman becomes in her waning years: a dry-witted, frank-speaking matriarch. Carson’s juxtaposition of the two characters gives a fullness to the woman’s life and honors the different selves that dwell in the same person.

Directly on the heels of this city girl’s tale of romance and vanity, the playwright inserts an oppositional piece, a farm woman’s story. In “Fun,” the woman marries at fifteen to begin the life of a farmer’s wife with its endless, exhausting physical labor. Her indomitable spirit, though, comes through clearly as she catalogues her daily tasks which include everything from mending fences and plowing with a mule to chopping off the chicken’s head and washing clothes. As she describes yet another back-breaking job, she assures the audience, “But we had a lot of fun; it’s just not like the fun we have now” (37). In “Secret Marriage,” the emphasis is on looking pretty with talk of dresses and trips to the drug store to sit idly and flirt. In “Fun,” this woman has a hard life, with no leisure time. Yet, her ironic monologue, very reminiscent of Carson’s earlier stories i ain’t told nobody yet, does not evoke pity. Since she is unimpressed by the volume of her work and accepting of her life role, the woman in “Fun” displays an indomitable spirit. Through this female character, Carson creates a portrait of the dependable, hard-working
farm wife and shows how she is responsible for not only her woman’s work but undertakes the man’s work as well as she goes to the field and tends the livestock. Carson makes a joke out of the drudgery, gets a laugh out of the ironic monologue, but still shows the strength and endurance of the woman.

Carson also includes a scene about the hard life of an African American female in Special Edition. Like the performers/daughters in The Blue Doctor and in The Gospel Truth, Swamp Gravy cast member, Gayle Grimsley, has the unique experience of telling her own story. Entitled “Education,” this scene by Carson is the only contemporary piece in Special Edition; all other stories are from at least two generations earlier. Because of the modern language and the references to the integration of schools, this story can be dated to the early 1970’s and seems very out of sync with the other pieces in the play, which range in time from Miss Zula’s early 1900’s to the 1930’s “Secret Marriage” and “Fun.” Therefore, “Education” is jarring in its incongruence to other scenes. Perhaps Carson intended this difference in order to increase audience awareness of the story.

In “Education,” Gayle, now in her mid-thirties, talks about her childhood, one similar to that of the African American woman in “Honor” from The Gospel Truth. Gayle is not raised by her mother either. As the monologue continues, she recounts her teen experiences of dropping out of school, falling in love, having a child out of wedlock, fighting in a bar, being arrested, and then being sentenced to twenty-three months in a rehabilitation center. “My granddaddy’s girl friend, not my mother, kept my baby,” she says, an example of what Collins calls the frequency of “othermothering”: “Othermothers -- women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities -- traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood” (123). Carson questions that sacred pedestal of motherhood and acknowledges the black woman’s struggle for identity with her creation of this character in “Education.” “Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African-American women is not surprising” for “black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other” (Collins 84). In her monologue, Gayle admits her own shortcomings as a young mother and reveals her quest for identity. In “Education,” it is her life journey that provides the instruction. The opening lines in the scene connect her to the newspaper
reporter: “Zula Toole, I had to cross the Georgia line to get my education. Came the hard way, too. In jail in Florida. But getting there is the story. Getting there is always the story” (Special Edition 10). It takes incarceration and the concern of a female counselor to redirect her path. Gayle says:

She listened to me without making judgments. She got me into the high school program, but it was me that got the diploma. She was good enough to point that out. She got me in the job training program. She even asked me if I’d talk with some of the other girls who were having a hard time talking to her, and I did it. I knew about that, and I could listen to them. And finally, finally, I began to have a sense that I really could be somebody, a sense that who I was and what I knew had value, and when I got out of that hell hole, I was not the same woman anymore. Not at all. It was not the incarceration that changed me; it was a person who cared. I just had to go to jail to find her. (Special Edition 12)

In “Education,” Carson presents an African American woman’s story of triumph and manages to insert a commentary on Colquitt’s race relations through Gayle’s remarks. Referring to her assault and battery charge, she observes, “I should have made the Miller County Liberal that week. I didn’t. The Liberal didn’t print black community news then” (Special Edition 11). As “Education,” proves, the playwright does not shy away from stories that do not reflect the dominant white culture; her writing is inclusive, telling of African American experiences, specifically that of a black female.

Through such stories as Gayle’s in Special Edition, Carson avoids a monolithic white feminism and gives voice to women of color. The last look at womanhood, both black and white, in Special Edition, is “Brown Dress.” It is a scene of female empowerment which is the most dramatic moment in the play. The spine is woven into this story as Miss Zula interviews a battered wife who has just killed her husband. The tale could have easily been about victimization, but Carson takes the script in another direction. When an abusive husband tries to beat his daughter again, the frightened wife and mother decides “enough is enough” and shoots the husband to protect the daughter. Using a pair of voices, one black and one white, with the performers standing back to back, Carson avoids racially stereotyping the scene and creates a story about the abuse of all women. The theme that violence is sometimes justified is plainly stated at the end of
the scene. The white female tells Miss Zula, “I have only one regret,” and her black counterpart concludes, “That I did not do it sooner” (Special Edition 37). In this tense scene in which the character’s desperation ends in resolution and action, Carson gives full meaning to the term female agency.

Throughout Special Edition, the writer also casually but consistently destabilizes the gender roles. One way Carson challenges the traditional patriarchal hierarchy is job switching by the female-male characters. Miss Zula goes off to the office while the men in the play are metaphorically stuck in the kitchen. The male characters discuss cooking in a series of scenes. Carson gets away with this technique by masculinizing the dialogue as the guys compare their barbecue sauce recipes and provide instructions on how to roast a whole hog. Granted these types of food preparation are usually associated with the men in the South, but the men are still the ones depicted in domestic duties while Miss Zula is the one at the newspaper office. One critic sums up Special Edition’s subversive feminism by saying the play is about the life of Zula B. Toole and “other strong-willed women in the county” (Loggins 1E).

Carson’s next play, The Rock and the Hard Place, continues her sly feminist style. Rather than focus on a single character as the spine with related side stories, in this script the author interweaves four independent story lines which reinforce a general theme of learning life’s lessons the hard way. One recurring story is that of the Anglin brothers, Miller County’s legendary criminal duo. According to the script, these two have shown up on “Unsolved Mysteries” and are the subject of a book because they managed to escape from the inescapable, Alcatraz, hence part of the reason for the play’s title, The Rock and the Hard Place. In a series of scenes Clarence and J.D. are depicted as poor boys who did not mean any harm; they just had a fondness for money that wasn’t theirs.

Throughout the play, Carson presents the brothers as fun-loving, likable thieves who always manage to make the law look foolish. So what does all this have to do with feminism? It comes in the last scene of the play. In it, the folk heroes sneak back home to attend their mother’s funeral, but in order to remain undetected, the Anglin brothers have to dress as women. This climatic moment, which could have been maudlin, turns to laughter, and the Anglins’ performance as females allows Carson to inspect the construction of gender in society. With each pat to their wigs, each straightening of the
seams in their stockings, and each heave of their over-sized bosoms, the prison escapees illustrate what they think it is like to inhabit a woman’s body; and with each responsive laugh the audience confirms their stereotypical behavior. It only takes painted fingernails, big pocketbooks, teetering high heels, and fake female voices to complete their construction of the female. While the rest of the Anglin brothers’ story appears to be a typical male-driven plot of action and adventure, the concluding scene of gender role reversals has a feminist element. After all, the only way these two fugitives can attend the funeral of their mother is by assuming the identities of women. They have to become women in order to pay their respects to the most important woman in their lives. So in a bizarre way, the Anglins’ feminine disguise is a double tribute to the power of women.

The other three story lines in *The Rock and the Hard Place* are all clearly female-centered. One is a humorous look at making moonshine, with women bottling the brew and becoming progressively drunker with each scene as they lick their fingers to take up the overflow. In their inebriated state, the two storytellers are the vehicles for a succession of stories about alcohol getting folks in trouble. First, there is the couple with their drunken Friday night fights ending in jail for the participants. The other two scenes are about getting drunk and breaking out of jail and making whiskey and getting put in jail. As the intoxicated women relate these stories of law breakers, they, too, exhibit transgressive behavior. Once again, Carson does the unexpected as she takes drinking and carousing, activities usually associated with males, and has the women engaged in these pastimes.

The other two continuing plots in *The Rock and the Hard Place* are serious in nature and focus on women’s stories only. They both deal directly or indirectly with race issues. One is the story of Colquitt’s only female superintendent of schools. This woman was elected to office in the 1940’s, fought for equality of school facilities, and implemented transportation for black students. In spite of opposition from Ku Klux Klan members and other community leaders, she gets the buses. While the superintendent was a woman of strength and political power in her prime, Carson chooses to present her as she is in her later life, an aging woman with Alzheimer’s. Perhaps the playwright needed to give the audience a look at this devastating disease with which she is all too familiar. Her mother was a victim of Alzheimer’s, providing Carson with years of opportunity to
study the subject. In fact, two of Carson’s plays, *Daytrips* and *Whispering to Horses*, both deal with the disease and its effects on her own mother-daughter relationship. In *The Rock and the Hard Place*, Carson revisits her hard place, and the two female characters in this community play reflect part of the playwright’s own life experiences. It is a bittersweet portrait of love and loss between the two women. Carson talks about the superintendent in her glory years but shows her on stage in her later life in her impaired state. The writer uses a variation of the same technique that worked in “Secret Marriage” to indicate the passage of time and to offer multiple dimensions of a woman’s life.

Carson’s final woman’s story line in *The Rock and the Hard Place* also returns to familiar territory. She reprises Gayle Grimsley’s “Education,” from *Special Edition* and expands the story to three segments. In this telling of Gayle’s story, there is the mention of segregated schools, hints of sexual violation, and the implication of racial injustice in her jail time. Because she is a black woman and not a white woman, she has experienced all of these traumas. The old southern expression to which the play’s title alludes is “stuck between a rock and a hard place.” Someone in such a difficult situation is usually doomed to failure. Gayle, however, manages to squeeze herself out and into success. With the expansion of the story, Carson moves a woman of color to a more prominent position. In *Special Edition*, there was a single scene; now Gayle’s story constitutes a major thread. Her scenes are the connections between the stories of the female superintendent, the moonshine women, and the Anglin Brothers. In *The Rock and the Hard Place*, Carson appears to focus on the men’s adventures, but three out of four of the recurring stories in the script are those of women. Carson awards more stage time to females and, thereby, grants them a place of empowerment.

Whether overt or covert, the elements of feminism contribute to all of Carson’s community plays. Because Jo Carson is the writer, a particular story gets told by Swamp Gravy on stage, and it is one that shows women in a generally positive, powerful light. “The storyteller has long been known as a personage of power,” observes Minh-ha, and Carson and her women storytellers exert such power in Colquitt (126). Through her community plays, Carson serves as “An oracle and bringer of joy, the storyteller is the living memory of her time, her people” (Trinh 125). Her writing has a feminist flavor, but it is delicate enough to be savored by all. In fact, it may not even dawn on those in
attendance that most of the stories focus on women, and that when they do not, the stories are still told by women. Even the cast probably does not realize this. Those in the play just know there are a lot of women, and these women want roles. Carson herself admits she has to write for the cast composition but downplays her feminist writing focus in the following way:

I don’t want to write any role that does not have a character’s own agency in it. This is a tremendously political idea for lots of reasons, and it puts me firmly in a feminist camp. But the only playwright I know of who ever made drama by lack of agency in his characters is Samuel Beckett, and the most famous play is Waiting for Godot, which is mostly an evening of yawns in the theater even with an exquisite production, and I’m taking a writerly lesson from that. (“Email,” March 14, 2005)

Potent, yet palatable, her feminism in the Swamp Gravy community plays does not seem political at all. While the radical feminists described by Jill Dolan might criticize Carson for not going far enough in advocating social change, her work is effective in its own way. There is a feminist “bite,” yet it is constrained. Coward notes the popularity of woman-centered novels, and Carson finds herself writing for popular culture, for a general audience. Rather than be divisive, her plays have to serve as a unifying force, focusing on women’s culture and strengths, while also being committed to telling the story of a whole community, male and female. Jo Carson frequently uses women as storytellers and tells stories in ways which champion women, hence her brand of feminism, but she is always writing about community. She explains, “People, communities, whatever living entity it is that wants courage, are changed by finding even a small measure of it, like the capacity to tell real stories out loud. It is what makes [the] arts so wondrous and so very dangerous all in the same breath” (“Email,” March 14, 2005). Feminism is not a mandatory component of the community play; it just happens to be Carson’s secret, savory ingredient. To open each play, cast members sing “The Storytelling Song.” It says of stories: “We’ll put ‘em all together and spice it all up, and we’ll have a storytelling time.” Carson’s recipe for the community play in Colquitt definitely includes a dash of feminism, and it is this feminist flavor in her texts that adds the spice to Swamp Gravy.
Jo Carson starts with oral histories of local people and incorporates elements of folklife, southern drama, and feminist drama. During the writing process, she then has to consider the community performance ideas of Swamp Gravy founder, Dr. Richard Owen Geer. His guidelines definitely influence her scripts. While working on his doctorate in performance studies at Northwestern University, Geer became convinced that theater could be something more than Broadway, the national standard, or Little Theatre, its community level counterpart. He saw both of these types of theater as elitist activities limited by the authors and choices of plays they stage, limited in the number and kind of performers they employ, and limited in the size and kind of audience they attract. With Swamp Gravy, he hoped to establish another kind of theater that he identifies as a theater “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Of the People” 28). As we will see, Swamp Gravy and Jo Carson’s writing for the Swamp Gravy plays are not always able to live up to the high ideals for Geer initially establishes. This chapter explores what Carson is able to achieve in writing scripts for “community performance,” some of the limitations inherent in the ways “the community” is presented in the plays, and some of the challenges she and Geer face in living up to the ideals that Geer articulates.

Text-wise, both Broadway and Little Theatre productions usually begin with a play written by a well-known professional. On Broadway a script may be new, but it will probably come from an established writer or from someone whose work producers hope will be marketable. Similarly, Little Theatre plays are generally re-treads of the tried and true. For instance, a look at records from the 1930’s shows George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare were two of the favorite authors in Little Theater productions around the United States (Perry 49). A list of today’s offerings often includes the same. So at the national level with Broadway productions and at the local level with Little Theatre, the
plays staged are those by established authors with proven audience appeal. In contrast, Swamp Gravy begins with new material by a relatively unknown writer.

The motivation for play production differs, too. With Broadway, the intent in staging plays by the chosen authors is artistic with economic benefit. The plays that continue to run are the ones that can draw audiences, the ones with a profit margin. Unlike Broadway, Little Theater concerns itself more with the theater experience rather than profit margin. A look historically at the concept of “little theatre” points to this different agenda. Writing in 1933, Clarence Perry says the term, “little theatre,” is “applied broadly to bodies which engage, more or less regularly, in dramatic productions and which are animated by intrinsic enjoyment rather than by monetary gain” (9). This early definition still fits the mission statements of today’s Little Theatre organizations. For example, Tallahassee Little Theatre’s mission statement is “to create opportunities for community participation in enriching theatrical experiences” to be achieved by “(A) Continuing to produce eight or more theatrical productions of high artistic quality each year; (B) Increasing the theatre’s impact on and service to the community; (C) Generating the necessary resources and efficiently managing those resources in support of the first two” (www.tallahasseelittletheatre.org). This third objective indicates the economic focus is there simply to sustain the program, not necessarily to make money.

Geer’s financial vision for Swamp Gravy was an intersection between Broadway’s and Little Theatre’s objectives. While the desire to be a community service was foremost, organizers of Swamp Gravy hoped productions would generate enough ticket sales to sustain the project and also to serve as an indirect boost to the local economy.

Broadway and Little Theatre may differ in economic goals, but both of these venues produce particular kinds of plays, chosen for their audience appeal. A 1996 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report, “American Participation in Theater,” lists three primary attributes audiences look for in a play: “a certain level of quality, relevancy (some personal connection to the theme or subject matter of the story), and entertainment value” (35). Like Broadway and Little Theatre organizations, Swamp Gravy strives for quality and entertainment, but it puts a greater emphasis on relevancy of the performance to both the performers and audience.

On Broadway and in Little Theatre, it is those interested in that art form who
provide the entertainment, and they are usually professional performers and directors. For the staging of plays, the cast and crew are limited to those with talent and skills (and in the case of Broadway, the necessary union credentials). If they are professionals, of course, talent is a prerequisite. Without a certain level of this commodity, the actor would be without a job. In other words, theater for professional performers is a career, a livelihood. Little Theatre productions may not involve paid professionals, but amateurs have to audition for roles. In both of these kinds of theater, a performer’s opportunity on stage is dependent on his/her ability, and participation is limited to those exhibiting the most talent. In contrast, Geer strives for inclusiveness of all amateurs in the Swamp Gravy casts.

The target audiences for Broadway and Little Theatre likewise are not the same as those of Swamp Gray. According to the NEA report on theater participation, patrons have certain characteristics. The following statistics from 1992 are relevant in that they pinpoint the time period in which Carson is writing scripts for Swamp Gravy’s community performance project. While twenty-four to twenty-six million adults attended stage plays in 1992, the profile of the typical play-goer does not represent a majority of the American population (NEA 11). The typical person attending a stage play comes from a household whose income is $75,000.00 or above (NEA 11). This audience member also has a bachelor’s degree or higher, is more likely to be female than male, is in the age range of forty-five to fifty-four, and is either single or divorced (NEA 11). Given this level of income and education, theater in America is definitely not reaching the masses. Geer’s intent was for Swamp Gravy was to attract a general local audience diverse in age, socio-economic background, and educational achievement.

Geer says, “Most professional theater in America fits into this category: nonlocal events written about by nonlocal playwrights are performed by nonlocal actors for a noncommunity of local theatre-goers” (“Of the People” 28). To counter this elitist reputation of theater, he wanted Swamp Gravy to be theater “of the people, by the people, for the people.” He had been a professional actor and director as well as a college professor and had staged everything from Shakespeare to Dracula to Of Mice and Men. As an academic, he had studied under Frank Galati, who specializes in the adaptation of other genres to the stage and is known for his play version of Steinbeck’s The Grapes of
Wrath. With a versatile professional and educational background, Geer had looked at theater from all angles. He said, “My experience as a director, teacher, and student of performance led me to believe that a large-scale, oral-history based play ‘of, by, and for’ the community was possible” (“Of the People” 28). Since his ideas were as yet untried, Geer used the Swamp Gravy project to define his own terms and formulate his particular performance model. He documents his experiment in his 1993 dissertation entitled “Community Performance: Efficacious Theater and Community Animation in the Performance Cycle of ‘Swamp Gravy Skteches.’”

First he had to settle on a name for the project in Colquitt. He considered the term, “grassroots theater,” preferred by Robert Gard (252) for his regional drama project, but Geer found it “unsophisticated” (“Of the People” 28). As early as 1917, Percy MacKaye had used the term “community drama” for his outdoor pageant (41). While he called for a “new American relation of art to democracy,” MacKaye was involved with what appeared to be a large-cast patriotic musical that had very little relationship to community or drama (41). MacKaye’s preferred term, “community drama,” was bypassed. Geer considered and rejected “alternative” as “too general” and “community-centered theater” as “clumsy” (“Of the People” 28). He settled on “community performance” and insists on a distinction between it and community theatre, a term often used synonymously with Little Theatre. In fact, Geer even refuses to use the spelling “theatre,” when writing about Swamp Gravy and community performance, explaining that this spelling alone can evoke an association with the established forms of theater, Broadway and Little Theatre (“Personal Interview,” March 3, 1997).

To create community performance, Geer says theater must be “of” the people, meaning the scripts for Swamp Gravy have to be original texts. He used oral histories, stories “of” the community to accomplish this prerequisite and relied on Carson to write a script from these community stories in Colquitt. Geer credits contemporary “socially involved” theater artists, Augusto Boal, Maryat Lee, and Ann Jellicoe, as influential in his community performance framework. “Like Jellicoe’s English productions, Swamp Gravy dresses itself in the past,” he says, where “the aesthetic distance created by a historical or quasi-historical look enables people to imbibe the multivocalities of text and context without being put on the spot” (“Out of Control” 110-111).
In order to “dress itself in the past,” stories of that past have to be gathered. Consequently, Swamp Gravy starts as an oral history project described in Chapter Two. The first phase of the community performance is the storygathering itself. Members of the community go out to talk with other members of the community. While the idea of performing frightens some people, this idea of collecting stories of the past seems to have broad appeal. Therefore, those individuals who have no desire to be on stage but who want to preserve the past can become involved in the community performance project. These people may have no intention of being in the production, yet they are very much a part of Swamp Gravy, assuming a necessary and vital role in the first step of the process. Because of the oral-history dimension of Geer’s community performance theory, more people can be a part of Swamp Gravy, can make a contribution, and can take pride in the final production. His “theater of the people” honors both the storytellers and the storygatherers, and Carson’s writing depends on their abilities.

Without this phase, Carson has no material, no starting point for the scripts of her Swamp Gravy plays. But Geer’s theater “of the people” requires a playwright who can take the disparate stories collected in a community and turn them into a unified play. Geer, who was already familiar with Carson’s stories and her earlier plays, felt she was the best candidate for the kind of writing needed in his project. “In September 1992, after a year of training locals as interviewers and gathering and transcribing stories, Carson was hired to create the first community performance text,” says Geer, readily admitting, “Nobody knew what that meant” (“Gathering Mayhaws” 24). With the use of oral histories and the dependence on other people’s stories for a text comes the issue of trust. Members of the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council had to trust Carson to be true to the community’s stories. Geer remembers the playwright’s challenge:

What Jo did in nine days was to make a performance text out of these stories and establish a performing style for Swamp Gravy. Her achievement was to make a community believe in the transformative and redemptive power of its stories. Jo’s gift, short and simple, is this: she can take transcriptions of Aunt Sally or Grandpa Gloomer and turn them into performance pieces that Sally and Gloomer embrace, on the one hand, and which are riveting theater deeply concerned with issues of social justice on the other. And she does it all in her own distinct voice.”
While Geer’s theater “of the people” relates specifically to Carson’s writing, as she must use the stories of the community, it is his theater “by the people” which presents the biggest challenge for the playwright. A critical element in Geer’s theory of community performance is that the stories of given community must be performed by members of that same community and not by professional actors. In the case of Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia, all cast members are amateurs, most of whom have never been in any kind of theatrical production before joining the project. They are all ages with the oldest cast member having been in her eighties and the youngest a six-month-old baby. In fact, some of the children in the cast, like Austin Spooner, that first Swamp Gravy baby, have grown up performing. Erin East, who was in Swamp Gravy from age eleven to graduation, has gone on to Yale and since earned her college degree. Many other young cast members have spent their formative years as part of the project, and when they head off to college, Swamp Gravy awards them a $500 scholarship towards their future education. To receive the scholarship money, the teen must participate in Swamp Gravy three out of four years during high school, and five were eligible in 2004 (CMAC records). This project from its inception until today attracts a variety of young people.

Like the children and teens, the adult cast composition also changes each season. Several veteran adult performers show up year after year while others join for a season or two and vanish. Some who are cast in roles never even last through the round of rehearsals. With this constant shift in population, Carson does not have the luxury of writing parts for specific people. There is no guarantee the person who performs one year will return the next. Therefore, she takes the oral histories, creates a text, and hopes the play can be cast the way it is written. If not, she has to adjust her script to accommodate available participants. The project rarely attempts to recruit specific people for specific parts, and needed performers have never been hired to fill the roles.

In addition to the variety in age and stability, the Swamp Gravy cast comes from different socio-economic levels. There are volunteers from all walks of life: teachers, preachers, business owners, doctors, factory workers, fast food employees, store clerks, housewives, and students, among others. While the backgrounds are diverse, the project
does seem to attract more middle class, post-secondary educated people. For instance, in 2000, out of a group of one hundred cast members, sixteen were or had been school teachers, and one was a principal. This proportion is higher than the usual ten percent of the population with a college education (“The Millennium and Beyond” Program, CMAC records).

Regardless of employment or educational background, people become involved in community performance for a variety of reasons. Most have no particular interest in theater and/or no particular skills in performance. Some come because they believe in the project’s mission to tell a story about their community. Many arrive at the urging of friends and relatives who enlist their participation. Others read about Swamp Gravy or watch a performance and just want to be a part of it. The novelty draws those who simply want to try something new; they think being a cast member will be fun. A few want to see if acting and singing are really for them, and a very few possess genuine talent they want to share (Personal interviews). For whatever reasons they join and whatever talents or gifts they do or do not bring to the Swamp Gravy project, all are welcome.

“Who comes, is,” Carson tells Linda Frye Burnham, in an attempt to explain the community performance casting plan (“I Can Write a River” 1). A frequent question from those in the audience is, “What do I have to do to be a member of Swamp Gravy?” Billy Kimbrel, a veteran Swamper and husband of former executive director, Karen Kimbrel, is quick to reply, “Can you fog up a mirror?” When the questioner looks dubious, Billy assures her or him, “If you’re breathing, you can be a member” (“Personal Interview,” October 18, 1999). With these comments, Jo and Billy are, in fact, echoing Geer’s “Community Performance Maxims.” “Everyone who shows up is cast,” says Geer, and he adds, “Everyone who wants a speaking role gets one” (“Out of Control” 110).

However, if someone wants to be a general cast member and have no speaking parts, he or she can just sing and dance in the production numbers without the pressure to do more. An atmosphere of acceptance and support allows hesitant first-time performers to begin where they feel most comfortable. Then as confidence builds, they can assume roles and then bigger roles.

Geer is quick to point out there are no stars in Swamp Gravy. Since multiple stories are told in each community play, there is a variety of performing opportunities but
no starring roles. This equality may be antithetical to professional theater, but it is one of the touchstones of Geer’s community performance. However, the lack of star power that Geer pursues presents a challenge to the playwright, who must create a script that contains continuity of story and character. Carson has to balance scenes between the spine and related stories, using central figures for audience recognition and plot connection. Counter to Geer’s claims, these reappearing characters come close to leads. For instance, those cast as the doctor in The Blue Doctor or Good Medicine, the preacher in The Gospel Truth, and the newspaper editor in Special Edition may not be deemed “starring” roles by Geer, but these parts certainly carry the most dialogue and most visibility in the plays.

The foregrounding of certain key figures achieves one of the objectives in Carson’s writing, which is to create memorable characters in the midst of many performers. The first production of Swamp Gravy featured about thirty performers, a fairly large cast in itself, but over the years the number has more than tripled, with as many as 100 or more participating in a given season (CMAC records). Carson readily admits she never intended to write for so many people. In the introduction to her play, A Preacher with a Horse to Ride, she notes the impracticality of such writing, vowing, “No more large-cast plays if I want people to consider producing them” (Alternate Roots 269). For her community performance pieces in Colquitt, though, Carson contradicts herself; here she must do the opposite and produce a script which does not limit the number of performers. In fact, she has to write to accommodate a large amateur cast, most of whose members want lines to say. This need for a multitude of small parts is antithetical to her preferred modes of storytelling -- monologues and dialogues, so she adapts her style to the Swamp Gravy casts.

In The Blue Doctor, Good Medicine, and Special Edition, for instance, she manages to provide lots of speaking parts. In the two plays about healing, she accomplishes many parts with what she refers to as calls and responses. She uses a similar technique in Special Edition. The opening scene, “I Come From,” is used to introduce the theme of food that will recur in the play. The short scene by Carson incorporates as many as fifteen separate voices, but the writing also allows for fewer characters to assume multiple lines, if necessary. The scene works well either way. She
also uses the “Cooks and Recipes” scene to present preferences on barbecuing and making sauces, and, thereby, gives the less confident performers single lines to say as they express these varying opinions on the best cooking techniques and best flavors.

In The Rock and the Hard Place, Carson creates the same effect with local folks providing details about the Anglin brothers. She writes a series of three scenes with townspeople talking about the local legends’ exploits or arguing about their whereabouts. In the opening segment, she gives background information on Alcatraz in a similar fashion. As Clarence and John William Anglin begin to talk about the prison, other voices add facts. One voice says, “Al Capone was there” while another offers, “Machine Gun Kelly was there” (The Rock and the Hard Place 3). A third remembers, “Alvin Karpis, one of Ma Barker’s boys was there,” and a fourth states, “The Bird Man of Alcatraz, Robert Franklin Stroud, was there” (The Rock and the Hard Place 3). As each new voice lists yet another desperado, Carson quickly establishes Alcatraz as the home of the most notorious criminals in America and the Anglins as their equals. In all of these examples, the playwright generates lots of small speaking parts, thus many performers have a chance to be heard. Because the voices are coming from various locations, Carson also projects the illusion of motion in the scenes. As speakers in different locations in the theater call out their lines, the audience shifts its attention to the areas of the speaker, and what is really a static scene appears to contain action, thanks to the writer’s stage directions.

Since the large cast varies in age but sometimes has a large concentration in particular ages, Carson has to write scenes which are age-specific. On occasions when there are many children and/or teens in the cast, she has been asked to create scenes exclusively for these age groups. In Swamp Gravy Sketches and Special Edition, she includes the scene, “School,” placing children of all ages in a one-room school setting. The biggest roles are for two teens, and Mr. Bean, the schoolmaster. Younger children in the cast usually like this scene because they are on familiar ground with the classroom setting and delight in “cutting up” at school. There are several one-liners for the timid ones, and no lines for those too young or too shy who just wish to be on stage and seen as part of the class. After having all the children line up in a row, Mr. Bean accosts each one individually and accuses him or her of perpetrating pranks such as stealing his
devotional book. The students have arranged themselves from the shortest to tallest, and Carson’s stage direction provides instant visual comedy. The younger ones who quiver as the schoolmaster approaches and others who do not utter a word but just emphatically shake their heads get laughs. Their body language alone is enough. The children a little braver yell, “No, sir, Mr. Bean,” when interrogated (Special Edition 23). The ascending order in size, with Mr. Bean terrorizing first the youngest and smallest ones and then moving up to the older, bigger students provides humor and generates suspense. In this scene, Carson gives these young amateur performers the opportunity to entertain the audience with their physical being; her lines are an added bonus.

In other plays, Carson has fully utilized the young cast members. The Blue Doctor shows the children and teens in a serious light as victims of diseases and accidents while in Good Medicine they get to have some fun in a group fishing scene with the doctor in a rare leisure moment. These scenes allow for the visual presence of the children on stage without calling for acting skills or feats of memorization on their part. For The Rock and the Hard Place, Carson has three such children’s scenes, “Flock I, II, and III,” in which she uses a group of youngsters to establish the combined themes of law and education:

Child: “I’d rather go to jail than to school. I think school is jail for boys.”
Child: “My daddy says the food is good in jail.”
Child: “How’s your daddy know that?”
Child: “I don’t know.”
Child: “It’s cause he’s a jailbird.”
Child: “He is not.”
Child: “Is so.”
Child: “Is not.”
Child: “Is so.”
Child: “Is not.”
Child: “Food is good in jail. My mamma cooks it.”
Child: “Your daddy makes her cause he’s the sheriff.”
Child: “He does not. She does it cause it is part of the job.”
Child: “Let’s do something and go to jail, and not go to school. We’d have more fun in real jail.” (1-13)
With a script like this one, Carson makes it easy for the children in Swamp Gravy to master the dialogue because it is so natural to them. The scenes are so much like everyday life that the young performers feel at ease delivering the lines.

In *The Rock and the Hard Place*, Carson writes a scene exclusively for teens. Teens are frequently absent for scheduled rehearsals, which can frustrate adults cast in scenes with them. Making this observation, Geer asked Carson to write a scene specifically for teenagers. They would be responsible for carrying the entire scene. Named simply “Teen Stories,” this segment has six teens talking about what homework they should be doing, but they admit they are thinking about the Anglin brothers instead. Wedged in with their musings about the bank robbers and general comments about school, Carson creates three monologues, one about fear of the unknown, one about being trapped in a cave in the dark, and one about being punished at school. These blocks of script submerged in the bigger scene give the more confident young performers a chance to be highlighted, and the overall set-up focuses on all six teens. They understand it is their scene and that its success depends totally on them. The teens-only scene also spares adult cast members the anxiety of poorly attended rehearsals by teens. Through this kind of age-specific writing, Carson lets the young amateur cast members know how important they are to Swamp Gravy. Since they are responsible for their own scene, which is an integrated part of the performance, the teens realize their contribution to the overall play. “Everyone has the power to save or ruin the show because everyone is onstage all the time. Promenade staging drives home the truth that the individual is responsible for the group,” says Geer (“Out of Control” 111).

Along with the concentrations in age categories, an unequal race and gender mix of the cast creates script challenges for the playwright. Male cast members in general are in limited supply with almost no men in their twenties available at all; the males are usually over forty or under eighteen. African American males are the fewest in number. With the exception of Darius and Emmanuel Haire, the sons of veteran cast member, Veronica Haire, only one African American male who joined Swamp Gravy stayed more than one season. A retired school teacher in his late sixties participated for two seasons, and two others lasted one season. Over the years, however, other African American males have signed up as cast members but failed to complete the run, and most never made it to
opening night. A specific example of this imbalance is documented in the “Celebrate the Millennium and Beyond” program of the year, 2000. The number of adult males, all white, is seventeen out of one hundred. Only six out of one hundred cast members were black, and only two were male, both of which were teens. Of the African American females in that same cast, there were three adults and one child.

This imbalance in race and gender concerns both Geer and Carson, and it does pose a challenge to the ideal of making Swamp Gravy a theater “by the people” (“Personal Interview,” September, 1997). While Swamp Gravy strives to be inclusive, in many ways it does not include all races and genders in a manner that is anywhere near representative of the population of the community. Part of the agenda in community performance is to promote social change, and in the South, race is still an issue for some. Geer’s dissertation focuses on Swamp Gravy project as a vehicle for improved race relations. Swamp Gravy strives to be representative of the community’s composition and to serve as a catalyst for social change, but in a county that is sixty percent white and forty percent black, the cast does not come close to these proportions; it is more like ninety percent or higher in white members (County Guide 4). When Carson writes the scripts, she always includes stories of both white and black people in the community, but to tell stories of race, Geer has to sometimes cast whites as the narrative voice for African Americans. This is not his or Carson’s preference, but Swamp Gravy is a volunteer organization; the director and writer have to work with those available. “The community” in Swamp Gravy, then, is not all-inclusive, however much Carson may strive to address issues of race.

While a lack of males, both white and African American, and a lack of African American females exist, there is an over-abundance of middle-aged white women in the cast, which causes other writing problems for Carson. In the last chapter it was noted that she attributes her liberal feminism to necessity. While I have challenged that view to some extent in arguing for a feminist cast to her writing, it is certainly true that when a story comes from the male perspective, she cannot always tell it that way because of these cast restrictions. There are simply not enough males for the roles. Sometimes she reshapes the stories so that females are the voices heard. Evidence of this technique of hers can be found in both The Blue Doctor and The Gospel Truth. To create a major role
for a woman in The Blue Doctor. Carson narrates the physician’s life through his daughter. In a similar way, it is the daughter who tells the audience about the fiery preacher in The Gospel Truth. Also in The Gospel Truth, Carson creates roles for three women in “Adultery.” This scene is about a man cheating on his wife, but three women get to act out his story with one female as witness to the event, another as the cheating husband, and the third as the vengeful husband after him. Carson’s method of storytelling allows for women to be cast, and it presents an unexpected perspective for the audience. While the unavoidable reality of too many females and not enough males definitely impacts the way Carson writes the Swamp Gravy scripts, she is able to turn this seeming disadvantage into an advantage. She opts for a female point of view, using the women in the cast as storytellers but remains true to the events of the males’ stories submitted to Swamp Gravy. The resultant effect is a different focus; subsequently, the women’s narrative voices add another dimension and serve as the lens through which the audience views the strong male characters in The Blue Doctor and The Gospel Truth.

Along with restrictions imposed by the cast’s age, race, and gender composition, Carson has to take into consideration the commitment level of amateurs. With Geer’s “theater by the people” and a cast of amateurs and volunteers, the rules for professional theater do not apply. “All cast members need not attend all scheduled rehearsals or even all performances,” Geer states as his second maxim of community performance (“Out of Control” 110). Because Swamp Gravy is very demanding in its rehearsal and performance schedule, it can be burdensome to a participating member. The director understands the time limitations and other obligations of cast members. These people are not paid professionals, and the director does not have the luxury of firing those performers who do not learn their lines or miss rehearsals. Carson considers this reality as she writes.

To guarantee a full cast for all performances, Geer usually double casts and sometimes triple casts roles. This arrangement is not the star-understudy dynamic of professional theater. All those cast in the roles are deemed equal in performance abilities, and, on any given night, an audience can expect a consistent level of performance. Of course, some cast members are naturally better than others, but with the concept of community performance, this is not the point. Perfection is not stressed; instead Geer emphasizes the importance of all cast members, another one of his maxims.
When Carson writes for the amateur cast members, she is very aware of the talent limitations. These performers are not paid professionals. She also has to allow for Geer’s lenient rehearsal schedule and understands that volunteers are not expected to have the same level of preparation as that of professional actors. Therefore, to deal with the lack of talent and preparation, Carson creates a performance style that hinges on what she calls, “direct address,” noting “I use direct address in all my work for the theater, not just the oral history plays like the ones for Swamp Gravy” (“Out of Control” 115). Carson elaborates on the value of this technique given both the realities of “the people” who are available to perform in the Swamp Gravy plays and the ways this technique affects the audience:

I use direct address and monologues so much because an unskilled actor can handle a storytelling job so much better than a traditional theatrical role in a scene in which they are asked to ‘become’ and ‘act’ another person. Also, storytelling lives in the mind of the hearer very differently than a scene that is acted or overacted or badly acted or overacted badly, etc., etc. Storytelling asks for a level of participation, of imagining, on the part of the hearer, and for the participation, I get a stronger impact from the story. (“Email,” March 14, 2005)

After that admission, Carson then explains how the technique works: “By direct address, I mean when a character violates the fourth wall and speaks directly to an audience, in character, but without the pretense of an internal monolog. The actor, in this context, for me, is a storyteller; the actor herself is the storyteller – playing the character in scenes is just a part of the job description” (“Out of Control” 115).

With alacrity, the playwright distinguishes her definition of storyteller from that of professional storyteller, remarking, “Some folks have made a profession of the recitation of Jack tales, the Brothers Grimm stories, the coyote trickster stories, and the like, and do performances of these stories under the billing of storyteller” (“Out of Control” 115). In her Swamp Gravy oral history-based texts, however, the story is not in the mouth of professionals who, Carson says, “have narrowed the scope of an honorable and very old idea, namely that storytelling is a function of being human, and not a skill given to the select few” (“Out of Control” 115). The cast members, amateur “human” storytellers, in her community plays talk to the audience and tell a story they believe in, rather than try to

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act or perform a story. “And it is moving, right up close to a religious experience – a community experience with real roots in it – when the stories have this kind of reality for the players and the audience. The experience is moved from behind a fourth wall,” explains Carson (“Out of Control” 115). This technique, then, helps reinforce the sense of Swamp Gravy as a performance “by the people.”

As those outside the culture of both the stories and the performers, Geer and Carson also rely on “consensus art” rather than “theater by committee or auteur” to create a community performance by the people. Once again, the choice to involve everyone affects Carson’s writing. This more democratic, communal investment in the project calls for a distinctive mindset in the director and playwright. In Geer’s style of direction, “no one is in control,” he says, adding that “everyone must feel comfortable with everything that goes on stage” (“Out of Control” 110). Because “collaboration means everyone,” Geer listens to the ideas of all, the cast, the crew, and other community members (“Out of Control” 110). Even children give their opinions about a scene, and their suggestions for staging and line changes are taken into consideration. While all theater by its very nature is collaborative, when all participants are allowed a voice, the resultant theater is collaborative in the strongest possible sense. The cast members in Swamp Gravy are invested in and committed to the play itself and certainly voice their opinions concerning the text.

This collaboration poses another type of challenge for Carson, though. In order for the plays in Colquitt to live up to Geer’s maxims of community performance that involves the cast as decision-makers as well as performers, Carson has to comply with the wishes of others, hence she calls herself a “house-broke” playwright (Personal Interview, September 1997). If anyone objects to a scene, it is discussed, and if the cast is adamant about the need for change, rewriting is a must. Carson has to keep her literary ego in check. What goes on stage in Swamp Gravy begins with her writing but must also meet the approval of performers and members of the community.

Her script for The Rock and the Hard Place is one incident of how negative feedback affected her work. The superintendent storyline, which focused on the only female school superintendent in the history of the Miller County School System, was deleted altogether after family members expressed their displeasure with the portrayal of
their relative. The daughter who shared this story with Carson expected to see her mother, the female superintendent, presented as a powerful woman in her prime, standing up to threats from the Ku Klux Klan and fighting for racial justice. Instead Carson characterized her as an old woman battling Alzheimer’s disease and her daughter. Her good deeds as school superintendent come out but are clouded by the filter of the mother’s deteriorating mind. The more complex character Carson created worked from a dramatic perspective but failed the community test. After much discussion, the scenes were omitted altogether in the fall run of the play (“Personal Interviews,” September, 1997).

Scenes are cut based on cast insistence, and amateur performers see nothing wrong with altering Carson’s scripts. “Stay on book,” the standard for a professional cast, is hard to enforce in a community performance piece. In fact, sometimes cast members cannot resist inserting their own lines. In The Gospel Truth, the preacher’s wife talks about going to Sunday dinner where the cook’s hygiene is questionable. The name of the scene, “Dishwater Chicken,” is an indication of the focus as the narrator fakes a fainting spell in order to avoid eating the chicken and dumplings, which look like they have been cooked in dishwater. During rehearsals a cast member, a preacher himself, told the story about a banana pudding he was served once which looked like it had raisins on top. He said when the woman put the dish down, however, the raisins flew off! The cast in the scene loved the story and included it in “Dishwater Chicken.” Although Carson objected to the mean-spirited nature of the addition, she was overruled (“Personal Interview,” October, 1995). Geer’s allegiance to consensus art can certainly limit the playwright’s control over her texts. In this venue, she has to be willing to bow to community demands rather than insist on strict adherence to her scripts.

In his theater “for the people,” Geer considers the target audience of community performance. Carson is supposed to be writing scripts that will reflect the community with the limitations noted above and be viewed by members of that same community. The initial audience was to be the folks of Colquitt, Georgia, and the surrounding area, and those residents certainly do not match the previously mentioned NEA profile of the typical play-goer with a $75,000 income and college education. The first performance, Swamp Gravy Sketches, did have an audience of local citizens as the home folks filed
into a school auditorium which would hold five hundred people. There were some empty seats.

The same audience composition and attendance were true for the second community play, *The Blue Doctor*, the first of Carson’s Swamp Gravy plays to be performed in Cotton Hall (CMAC records). People who had never been to much more than a high school play had for the first time the opportunity to witness their friends and neighbors performing their stories of community. Then due to word-of-mouth advertising, feature stories in metropolitan newspapers and *Southern Living* magazine, and marketing strategies to tour bus guides, Swamp Gravy began to attract audiences from outside the community. Those who spent their childhoods in Colquitt and had moved away heard and read about the project, and many came back to see what was going on. Whether still living in Colquitt or having moved away years earlier, the hometown folks especially feel the power of Swamp Gravy. They are the ones who already know many of the stories, who have grown up hearing them, or who have maybe lived them. For these audience members, Swamp Gravy can indeed be a personal experience. The performance is about their lives or the lives of their parents or grandparents or friends or neighbors. It sometimes hits home, and the community performance project does live up to its ambition of being Geer’s “theater for the people.” One illustration of this hometown connection in the audience is Mike McCann. He left Colquitt immediately after high school in 1969, went away to college, then moved to Ohio. That was over thirty years ago. When he watched a scene in Swamp Gravy, he leaned over and whispered, “That’s Miss Olive; she lived right next door to me” (“Personal Interview,” October 20, 2000). The recognition of someone he had not thought about in years gave him pleasure and an immediate personal investment in the play; it took him to a place of memory. So for those who experienced the stories and knew the people in them, the response to the Swamp Gravy plays can be almost visceral.

While the hometown folks who come seem to be visibly moved, however, the vast majority of Miller Countians have probably never seen a Swamp Gravy play. Participants and arts council officers wonder why more local folks do not attend the plays (CMAC records). It is the community’s play and should be enjoyed by that community. Several discussions have focused on this issue, but a viable solution has not been forthcoming.
Theater attendance, just like cast participation, is voluntary, and Swamp Gravy cannot make local folks come. To generate interest, the arts council has offered special nights for hometown people, which are free of charge (CMAC records).

During the first five years, anyone could attend the Thursday night dress rehearsal without an admission fee. Also once per season, Southwest Georgia Farm Credit invites members of its farming co-op to a performance. The agency mails out invitations and makes a donation to Swamp Gravy to reserve a Thursday night for their members (CMAC records). In addition to the free tickets, free refreshments are available at intermission. On these nights, the entire audience comes from Colquitt and the surrounding counties. School groups also may attend at a reduced price, and area high school teachers and college professors have reserved seats for entire classes, thereby bringing up the number of young African Americans in attendance. Twice a year, Swamp Gravy has family nights, where cast and crew may invite two family members and/or friends each to attend free performances, so these audiences are composed of local residents. In 2003, the Swamp Gravy cast faced its largest audience ever when members performed at the Albany Civic Center for the United Methodist Annual Conference. Instead of just conference attendees, the general public was invited to this performance advertised on television and in the newspaper. The cast presented an abridged version of Carson’s *The Gospel Truth* to an estimated 3,500 people, over ten times the number that can attend a Cotton Hall performance. It was Swamp Gravy’s largest venue ever and the closest Swamp Gravy has come to actualizing theater for the masses.

Geer’s community performance project may have started out as a play “for the people” of Colquitt, but it now has general audiences composed mainly of strangers who have never walked the streets of the town before. Increasingly over the years of performances, the composition of the audience has shifted. They come by the bus loads for the express purpose of seeing the play. This outside interest is the result of marketing by the arts council to attract tour bus groups. As tour guides came to a show and liked what they saw, they added Colquitt, Georgia, to their itineraries (CMAC records). With the tour bus population arriving, Billy Kimbrel says, “Cotton Hall is full of cotton heads” (“Personal Interview,” October 21, 2003). Those on tours tend to be older than the forty-five to fifty-four audience age range set by the NEA study. They are usually retirees, the
ones with the time and the money to go on bus tours, and they are looking for entertainment. Most find it, and they find something more. As these people exit the theater, many come up to cast members, telling them how moved they were by the performance. The intended audience of local people was never fully realized, and Geer’s theater “for the people” no longer lives up to its intent. The plays are not just for hometown folks but for all who come to watch, and Swamp Gravy has become a product of cultural tourism, catering to visitors with dollars to spend. As noted in previous chapters, as a writer, Carson chooses local stories which are true to the southern culture but they also have mass appeal. A native Colquittan may relish the plays more or in a unique way, but residency is not a prerequisite for attending and enjoying Carson’s community performance pieces.

Another part of the Swamp Gravy appeal for the outside audience may be the performance space itself. Cotton Hall is the optimum space for performer-audience interaction to occur; it is the setting for what Geer calls promenade theater. The design facilitates a convergence of Geer’s theater “by the people” and “for the people.” His staging techniques guarantee audience proximity while Carson’s insistence on direct address connects the performers with their listeners. The first collaborative effort of Carson and Geer, Swamp Gravy Sketches, was performed on a traditional proscenium stage in an elementary school auditorium and, therefore, lacked the intimacy of Cotton Hall performances. After that first production, Geer began to search for a permanent performance space for the project. Formerly a cotton warehouse, the building that is now Cotton Hall was not intended as a theater. At the time Geer spotted it, it was being used as a storage space. He saw the possibilities of the place, and the owner was approached about the use of it. He graciously loaned his building to the arts council free of charge. Those first performances there featured multiple staging areas with seating consisting of football stadium bleachers brought in on loan for the shows. There was no air conditioning, and the floor was dirt. The main staging area was the original loading dock of the cotton warehouse, but it converted nicely to a long front stage. Geer designed a center pod around the central post of the warehouse as another stage, and a side platform was built as a narrow performing space in the north portion of the theater. An extended truck bed became the fourth staging area. The old truck, a junk vehicle stored in the
warehouse, is now an integral part of the theater as are the support posts. Scenes are also staged on the floor, where general admission members of the audience stand along with cast members who are either performing or just watching.

Over the years, the staging areas have remained consistent while improvements to the theater have increased the comfort of the audience. During the first season of Swamp Gravy in Cotton Hall, a native Miller Countian attended one of the plays and was so moved by the performance that he bought the cotton warehouse for $30,000 and donated it to the arts council. A plaque on the outside of the building attests to his generosity (“Celebrate the Millennium and Beyond” 31). Then theater seats (donations from old schoolhouses and abandoned theaters) replaced the borrowed football bleachers; a layer of cement covered over the dirt floor, and air conditioning, bathrooms, a lobby, and a museum were added. During this massive renovation, the architect, Colquitt native, John Rentz, was able to retain the rustic look of the cotton warehouse while modernizing the facility (CMAC records). The result is a performance space, which works towards total audience involvement and is, at least in this sense, a “theater for the people.” With the new seating and steps leading up to it, cast members can use all the previously constructed staging areas as well as the steps and platforms around the seats. A closeness to the performance by the audience is guaranteed. “We sit in judgment, we stand in appreciation; it’s as simple as that,” says Geer, explaining his staging techniques derived from Jellicoe’s work in England (“Out of Control” 128).

As performers and audiences stand together on the floor and as cast members go up into the audience to mingle, something seems to happen between performers and viewers; the distinctions between the two blur. One audience member said she loved to be in Cotton Hall, “‘Cause you can never tell when the person next to you is gonna start to sing” (“Out of Control” 128). With Geer’s promenade theater, an intimate exchange is possible. The multiple levels of stages and the nearness of the audience provide the setting for Carson’s scripts to be delivered in direct address.

To insure a quality show with Swamp Gravy’s volunteer cast and crew in this unique performance space, Geer insists on a core of professionals. Along with him as the director and Carson as the playwright, the lighting and set designers are paid professionals. The stage manager is an employee of Colquitt/Miller Arts Council, too.
Like MacKaye, who believed community drama back in the early 1900’s could “only be made by trained creative artists, expert in the art of the theatre and inspired by the spirit of the community,” Geer believes in bringing in professional expertise from outside the community (41). However, unlike McKaye, he insists on significantly limiting the number of professionals involved and has proven that with a few professionals in key positions an amateur cast and crew can achieve an aesthetically-pleasing production. Good reviews in various publications and state and national recognition of Swamp Gravy attest to the success of Geer’s approach.

Because of his concepts, Carson’s scripts, and Cotton Hall’s intimacy, the community performance model has been successful. From the beginning, the agenda in Colquitt has been three-fold. The project should have an impact on individuals, on the community, and on the economy. Swamp Gravy has been a catalyst for change for some of those involved with the project. As a director, Geer admits that the change began with himself. He had to abandon his former demeanor as an autonomous director and become accustomed to sharing power. He had to also focus on the performer’s personal needs as he dealt with volunteers rather than paid actors. Flawless performances could no longer be his objective as a director. “How far from humane my life in art had been. It took the people of Colquitt to show me that American theater is held together by desire and oppression,” he said (“Out of Control” 125). As the director became less powerful in the traditional sense, other participants in Swamp Gravy were empowered.

From storygatherers to the stage crew to the performers, all are honored for their contributions, and many are changed by the experience. In 2003, visionary Joy Jinks made the list of the one hundred most influential Georgians due to her founder’s role in Swamp Gravy (Georgia Trend 39). Karen Kimbrel, who was an administrative assistant, served as executive director of a multi-million-dollar budget nonprofit arts organization for eleven years, and she was also able to use her artistic talent as a songwriter for the Swamp Gravy plays (“Personal Interview,” Sept. 28, 2000). She now works as a consultant for similar projects. Charlotte Phillips, a housewife when she joined the project, writes songs, serves as a storygathering and storygathering facilitator, and is employed as curator of the Museum of Southern Cultures located in Cotton Hall (“Personal Interview,” Sept. 28, 2000). Billy Kimbrel, Buddy Johnson, and others,
people possessing acting and singing talent, now have a local stage and an audience while Kent Richardson, a middle school principal, and Ricky Clarke, a grocery store owner, changed from reluctant cast members to seasoned performers (“Personal Interviews,” Sept. 28, 2000). Children like Tarah Sloan have gained the confidence to say a line on stage, a giant step forward for her in personal courage. During her first few seasons, she would become nauseous and could not deliver her lines. Now she requests larger roles and has also expanded her interest in theater, participating in Bainbridge Little Theatre productions as well as Swamp Gravy (“Personal Interview,” August 15, 2004).

Cast member Gayle Grimsley credits Swamp Gravy with the change in her life. “I’ve had dreams and ideas stored away in my head for years, but it was not until Swamp Gravy opened the doors that the dreams could come out,” she said (“Out of Control” 106). Because of her involvement in the project, this one time law-breaker was able to create Program Bounce for at-risk youth in her African American community. The after-school program began with a grant from the Department of Health. She hopes through her intervention program young people can avoid some of the mistakes she made. Gayle’s success story is just one example of an individual’s self-actualization through the community performance project. Geer with his community performance theories and Carson with her community play design came to town, and some of the people of Colquitt will never be the same. As dramatic as it may sound, Swamp Gravy can change lives.

On this small rural community, Swamp Gravy has also left its mark. A town of 2,000 with nothing special about it has acquired a sense of pride in its heritage and in its artistic accomplishment. Colquitt, Georgia, is now on the map because of Swamp Gravy. The project in terms of community building has reached well beyond its original purpose even if it is not fully representative of the actual racial make-up of the community. In a place largely untouched on the personal level by integration, black and white do come together to make a play. There are hugs exchanged, conversations held, friendships established, meals shared that may never have occurred except through Swamp Gravy. That in itself is an achievement in this rural, southern community. For the first time, interaction not imposed by school integration is possible. One example is Veronica Haire, an African American who performed in Swamp Gravy for over ten years and was a
CMAC employee. She tells the story of her neighbor’s curiosity about all those white folks coming to her house. Veronica’s husband, Louis, who has a brain tumor, was taking chemotherapy, and Veronica had undergone surgery herself. Her neighbor watched as white Swamp Gravy cast members came to visit, brought food, and took Louis for his treatments when Veronica was unable to do so. When the neighbor asked her who that white man was that Louis left with, she replied, “That’s my white brother” (“Personal Interview,” October 3, 2001). Cast members in Swamp Gravy do claim one another as family. With participation in a community performance project open to all ages, all races, and all socio-economic groups, camaraderie can be established. “Specifically, Swamp Gravy lures people into what appears to be a conservative process – the celebration of heritage – which is, in fact, a subversive and liberalizing process that exposes people to one another and to themselves,” Geer concludes (“Out of Control” 127).

Along with the hope of cultural, communal changes, the project has an economic impact on Colquitt. Swamp Gravy now attracts thousands of visitors each performance season. As those folks come to town to see the plays, they have to eat and sleep and buy gas, incidentals, and souvenirs. These tourist dollars are a boost to the agriculturally-based community, where this source of revenue was totally unexpected. “Swamp Gravy is a fine example of how a cultural energy can bolster the economy of a depressed area and how the arts can pull a community together,” writes Betsy Baker of the Georgia Arts Council in Georgia Trend magazine (14). “We’ll look for these kinds of role models to see how they can help us make things happen in other communities across the state,” she adds (14).

Since its inception, Swamp Gravy has moved from an artistic dream to a community performance project, which has local, state, national, and international significance. It has brought economic prosperity to Colquitt in the form of tourism and downtown revitalization through the restoration of a hotel to accommodate play-goers and renovation of a cotton warehouse to serve as a unique theater. People’s lives have changed because of their involvement in Swamp Gravy. Oral histories are being recorded and archived, and plays have been staged for the empowerment of those participating and for the enjoyment of local folks and visitors attending. Official recognition has come at the state level as well. The project received a $100,000 grant from the Woodruff
Foundation (Coca Cola), a $15,000 National Endowment of the Arts grant, Georgia Humanities grants, and numerous other grants and private donations (CMAC records).

In addition to being named “Georgia’s Official Folklife Play,” state level achievements include invitations to perform at the Capitol and at the Governor’s Mansion. Seven Stages Theater in Atlanta also hosted a performance and auction, using a Swamp Gravy sell-out as a fund-raiser for the theater there, and the Georgia Press Association invited Swamp Gravy to perform Special Edition, its play about pioneer editor, Zula B. Toole, for its annual convention (CMAC records). Following this Special Edition performance, Miss Zula was inducted in the Georgia Newspaper Hall of Fame, and her portrait was hung in the Henry Grady School of Journalism in recognition of her achievement in the field. Without the incentive of Carson’s play, this remarkable newspaper woman would still be in obscurity (Terry Toole, “Personal Interview,” June 25, 1996). Swampers are also indefatigable in their touring schedule; they take a sample of Swamp Gravy to many cities around the state of Georgia each year (CMAC records).

Swamp Gravy, however, has its best flavor at home in Cotton Hall. In any given audience there will be many Georgians in attendance but also people from all over the United States and almost always a few from around the world, giving it national and international exposure. Sometimes even celebrities attend the play. When former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalyn, came to a performance in the fall of 1996, all of the Swampers were astir. That same year in November, the group received an invitation from the National Association of Partners in Education to perform at the Kennedy Center. With that sold-out performance of Special Edition in Washington, Swamp Gravy earned a national reputation for excellence in the arts. “The idea of a group of ordinary citizens writing their own songs, music, and stories and then presenting them on a national stage was awesome,” said Swamp Gravy cast member, Debbie Sloan, after the Kennedy Center performance (“Personal Interview, December 20, 1996). The cast was also part of the Cultural Olympiad chosen to perform at Centennial Park during the Olympics in Atlanta; this invitation was an opportunity for a truly international audience.

Because of the community performance maxims of Richard Geer and the scripts of Jo Carson, Swamp Gravy approaches theater of the people, by the people, and for the people. There are definite limits to what they have been able to achieve in this regard. As
theater of the people, it does attempt to the tell stories of all the people of Colquitt, but because of the limited number of storygatherers and storytellers, it only presents representative stories of a few. Swamp Gravy also tries to live up to its axiom, “by the people,” in its casting; however, it has failed to attract any significant participation by males and African Americans in the community. In Geer’s ideal community performance, the audience would come from the community itself and would not be tourists passing through town for a night of entertainment. In spite of all these shortcomings, Swamp Gravy moves toward a theater that is not elitist, that is inclusive, that is meaningful. In the words of Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” However flawed the outcome, the ambitions of community performance are noble, and those involved seem to try to reach their ideals. Through this model for a different kind of theater, Carson has the opportunity to write plays that serve as a mirror, however imperfect, of the small town southern community of Colquitt, Georgia. The NEA report predicts a “resurgence of traditional art forms such as storytelling and monologue,” and Swamp Gravy attempts to offer such theater now (37). Linda Frye Burnham calls the Swamp Gravy project “a remarkable outcome considering its unconventional staging, its often tough subject matter, and its deeply personal content,” and she concludes, “The play will remain the current voice of the community, a forum where issues can be examined, history recorded, and avenues explored” (“Swappin’ Lies” 41). As it continues, Swamp Gravy uses the community performance model originated by Geer and the design of scripts written by Carson to preserve the past of the Colquitt community and to impact the present and future of its people.
CONCLUSION
A RECIPE WORTH REPEATING

Colquitt, Georgia, is the place where Jo Carson concocted her recipe for community performance writing, and over a decade later the result still has audiences wanting a taste of Swamp Gravy. The oral-history based community performance plays, originally written by Carson and directed by Richard Geer, continue in Colquitt as the Colquitt/Miller Arts Council’s produces a new Swamp Gravy play each year. Other communities have also sampled Carson’s recipe. Community Performance, Inc. (CPI) and Swamp Gravy Institute (SGI), both fee-based consulting groups, have introduced the model to other communities around the United States. CPI, founded by Richard Geer, brings in a team of professional artists composed of a director, playwright, choreographer, lighting technician, and set designer. SGI is an arts service organization and an outgrowth of Swamp Gravy. It employs storygatherers and cast members as trainers and consultants. According to the institute’s organizer, Bill Grow, its purpose is “to catalyze the replication of this spirit in other communities and organizations through short-term story-based consult and custom-designed training academies that combine its own unique story-based artistry with planning and reflective methods developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs” (www.swampgravy.com). SGI has conducted programs in partnership with CPI in such places as Belle Glade, Florida, and Yampa Valley, Colorado, and independently in Arlington and Ashburn, Georgia; El Paso, Texas; Columbia, Louisiana; Denver, Colorado; and Wapakoneta, Ohio (www.swampgravy.com). CPI has several other community performance projects to its credit as well.

After her work with Swamp Gravy, Carson has gone on to leave her mark across America as a writer. Outside of her community performance pieces, she has written other plays, Bear Facts, Whispering to Horses, and If God Came Down, with the last two performed at 7 Stages in Atlanta. She was the recipient of a Theatre Communications Group/NEA residency award that funded her work with 7 Stages. She is also the author of two upcoming books, Spider Speculations: A Physics and Biophysics of Storytelling to be released in June, 2006, and Liars, Thieves, and Other Sinners on the Bench, a
compilation of community performance pieces and others, to be published in 2007. She continues to perform her own work, directs workshops on storytelling, and teaches a playwriting course at the college level.

The bulk of her writing, though, has been in community performance with over thirty plays to her credit as of 2006. She worked first as a part of CPI, Geer’s artistic team; then she wrote individual projects of her own and has collaborated with other directors. As part of the CPI team, she has written for communities in Chicago, Illinois; Newport News, Virginia; Steamboat Springs, Colorado; Belle Glade, Florida; and Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. In cooperation with the Fulton Opera House, she authored a play for Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and has written community performance pieces for Etowah, Tennessee; Camden County, Georgia; Port Gibson, Mississippi; and Harlan, Kentucky, among others. Wherever she is called to work, Carson seems to have the ability to write scripts that reflect the nature of that particular community and its people. Newspaper reporter, Jim Ruth says the playwright can “absorb information and impressions faster than a Bounty towel sucks up liquid. Puts it in human context and shapes it into a literary landscape of the human spirit on which any community worth its salt is founded” (H-1).

As Carson helps communities tell the stories of their people, she makes an important contribution to these communities, and she also spreads her hybrid literary form. The continued appeal of Swamp Gravy and replication of the project in other communities depend partially on Carson’s writing formula of mixed genres. Her later community plays contain elements of oral history, the folklife play, southern drama, community performance, and liberal feminism found in her work for Swamp Gravy. As she writes for each community, she relies on these basic components, but her recipe allows for individual tastes. The amount of the ingredients added by Carson varies based on the needs or wishes of a particular community. She is the author of many community performance plays, but each has its distinct flavor.

For instance, there is her writing in Chicago, where oral history is the most identifiable ingredient. When Carson writes for a multi-cultural, metropolitan area like Chicago, the stories have to reflect a diverse culture. As in Colquitt, her writing in Chicago began with oral history gathering by volunteers, and she writes the plays based on the stories that are then performed by volunteer amateur cast members using her direct
address method. In the Chicago scripts written for Scrap Mettle/SOUL (an acronym for Stories of Urban Life), she tells the individual stories of displaced native Americans, African Americans, Vietnamese, and people of other ethnic origins. In fact, Geer says more than sixty cultures can be found in the ten block neighborhood of the Chicago project ("Personal Interview," September 1999). It is a definite challenge for Carson to create a script that reflects such ethnic diversity. She also gives voice to the homeless, the focus of the Scrap Mettle project, and to angry, street-smart teens, the SOUL component. The resultant community performance plays are very similar to the first production in Colquitt, Swamp Gravy Sketches; that is, they are individual vignettes loosely stitched together by a common thread of urban life.

In Colquitt, Georgia, it is an easier task to add folklife details to a play. Carson can capitalize on southern expressions, tell stories about planting peanuts and cotton, dress the set with farm implements, and the culture of the rural south is apparent. “The work of a place is always important in speaking of a place,” she stresses (“Email,” March 13, 2005). To present folklife, that is life of a particular group of people, in this case a neighborhood in Chicago, Carson has to find another common denominator. Her recurring “Get on the Bus” scenes manage to instantly encapsulate big city life with its dependence on mass transportation. The bus becomes a visible folklife detail for the urban area. Using the same music and setting, the “Get on the Bus” scenes highlight different individual’s stories while they unify the overall play.

In Newport News, Virginia, the playwright once again emphasizes oral history and folklife elements. Her four community performance pieces to date, Pieced Together, Cross Tides, Hand Me Down Shoes, and Plowing Outback, originate with stories of the Mennonites who settled in the area. The first community play traces how the Mennonite community was established in Newport News and is very much a folklife play, resplendent with its details of Mennonite culture and with the cast in plain clothes. The second play contains evidence of Mennonite folklife, too, but it also examines the river culture specifically with stories of oysters and boating in Tidewater, Virginia. Cross Tides also looks particularly at race and tolerance as it contrasts two stories, that of Preacher Taylor, a highly moral black man who interacts with the Mennonites, and that of Capt. Jack, a drunken river man who is nevertheless accepted by the same God-fearing
community. This play, which Carson calls one of her favorites, is about self-examination and tolerance. The playwright offers the following analysis of her two Cross Tides’ characters:

Preacher Taylor was accepted in the Mennonite community; he was treated as an equal, or as close as a black man got to it in those dates. He ate dinner at the Mennonite table with families he knew and traded with. He traded a lot as a junkman in the Mennonite community, and he was valuable and respected in that community because he had parts for things others didn’t have. Captain Jack was a drunken, racist reprobate. He’s a squatter on a Mennonite farmer’s land, and it is he [Capt. Jack] who has such a problem with Preacher Taylor, especially with Preacher Taylor sitting with whites at family dinner, which he did a lot when he was in the community…. Captain Jack would hunt for that situation and make himself truly obnoxious when he found it…. Now the play is 100% about tolerance; it is just a different turn on tolerance than you think it is going to be.

The farmer on whose land Jack is squatting set out to turn the man around with kindness because it was likely Jack was not long for the world, and he didn’t have the heart to just pitch him off the property. He did manage to change Jack’s heart a little. Jack even eventually joined the Mennonite Church. The Mennonites took in the man they really didn’t want, true tolerance, for my money. (“Email,” March 13, 2005)

Carson’s third play for the Mennonite community in Newport News, Hand Me Down Shoes, was written after 9-11 and focuses on a man who did Mennonite service in Constantinople at the end of World War I. He worked with refugees fleeing from Russia after the overthrow of the czar and before the Reds won the revolution. “His second wave of refugees were Mennonite farmers – remember pacifism is a tenant of the religion – from the steppes of Russia who were fleeing terrorists, if ever there was such a thing; the stories were horrific and endless, and the people who had lived to be the refugees were the people who had picked up weapons and fought,” Carson explains (“Email,” March 13, 2005). It is a play about people who resorted to violence, “offended God,” and lived to regret it; it is “about letting go of fear, another tough, brave piece for a community to choose to do” (Carson, “Email,” March 13, 2005).
Her fourth play for the Mennonites is one that she admits is a feminist piece. *Plowing Outback* has a woman as the central character, Effie, who was adopted into the Mennonite community. The play looks at women’s changing roles within that community. Carson calls it “a funny, funny piece. Effie is wonderfully brash, a playwright’s dream” (Email, March 13, 2005).

Although the four Mennonite community plays seem to bear little resemblance to their predecessor, Swamp Gravy, the common elements of oral history, folklife, and feminist theater are there. Like its southern counterpart, the Newport News productions feature music to support the scenes of the plays. The Mennonite performances are very different in texture and tone as the austere nature of the Mennonites comes through in the production. While Swamp Gravy sometimes resembles a rollicking Saturday night square dance, *Pieced Together* and *Cross Tides* are more like a sedate Sunday night sing. Billed as a folk opera, the second Mennonite play features Carson’s intentionally sparse text, which is crafted to share equal billing with Sally Rogers’ original music. Because the Mennonite community performance plays represent a much more reserved culture than the big-laughs, back-slapping style of Swamp Gravy, Carson demonstrates her ability to be community-specific in her Mennonite scripts derived from the oral histories bolstered by folklife details.

Her list of credits also includes a piece written for Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The plays in Colquitt focus on a time period roughly from 1900-1940, and the Mennonite plays range from settlers’ days to present, but her writing for the Colorado community has a more contemporary feel, yet it details the folklife of that area. Mining stories, school stories, mountain stories merge to paint a picture of a community developing in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains.

One of her projects independent of CPI or SGI was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Like Chicago, Lancaster contained a heterogeneous population, and Carson decided to base her play on the residents’ reasons for being in Lancaster. “The stories about how and why people came here are fascinating,” explains Carson (“Email,” March 13, 2005). She proceeded to write the story of a Greek woman caught in the occupation of her homeland while visiting her parents there at the outbreak of World War II. A Cambodian woman imprisoned in a Khmer Rouge work camp when she was nine was the subject of another
scene. A woman whose family took great risks to harbor escaped slaves and ferry them to freedom through the Underground Railroad was yet another story told. To encompass this diversity, Carson leaned heavily on oral history, and the result is the play, *Lancaster Speaks*. Also since most of the narrative voices heard in her direct address monologues in the script are women, this particular work seems to be more feminist than either the Chicago, Newport, or Colorado performance pieces.

In Florida, Carson was contracted to write community plays for locations at opposite ends of the state. The geographic areas are very dissimilar as Belle Glade in south Florida is on the edge of the everglades and is actually a farming community while Grayton Beach on the western Florida panhandle is beach resort property. Belle Glade came first with its project called “Potluck in the Muck.” From the stories gathered about row crop production, what the muck is known for, and the single catastrophic event of the area, a devastating hurricane in the 1920’s, Carson creates a play reminiscent of *Swamp Gravy Sketches*. The scenes are loosely connected by a common theme of work and contain rich folklife details about the planting, harvesting, and marketing vegetables. Some of the region’s migrant laborers were interviewed, and their oral histories are about how they came to Belle Glade and what their lives were like once they arrived in south Florida. The left Georgia and Alabama during days of the Depression to find work in Florida, and these individual stories fill the script. So that general theme of origin found in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, play shows up in this work as well. In *Potluck in the Muck*, Carson uses oral histories and folklife elements to create a community performance piece about a small but very unique geographic area populated by a transient population.

Another Florida project that follows Carson’s formula for *Swamp Gravy Sketches* was Ft. Walton’s *Grace and Grit*. Instead of the expected beach stories, the playwright creates scenes about rattlesnakes, midwives, and cave diving from the oral history collection. “The specific intent of that piece was to be about the whole county and not just the beach, and rattlesnakes are there because of Freeport’s yearly Rattlesnake Roundup,” Carson explains (“Email,” March 13, 2005). Her only beach tale focuses on a popular resort at Grayton Beach in the 1930’s. Compared to her previous community performance pieces, this Fort Walton play most closely resembles its forerunner in
Colquitt. Aspects of the folklife play, oral history, and community performance are once again present as they are in all of her writing of this type, but the flavor of southern drama and feminism are evident, too.

With the panhandle of Florida so close to Georgia and not so far removed from Carson’s native Tennessee, the southern influence surfaces. The playwright is at home again. As outlined by Charles Watson’s criteria for southern drama, there is evidence of social types and an emphasis on violence as Carson writes scenes about rattlesnakes, cave diving, and hunting. In one such scene, a man goes out turkey hunting but thinks he has run into a bear. Carson says this scene is actually about “a man intolerant of other’s weakness or fear finding a level of tolerance in himself for his son-in-law who would be done damage by the real story” (“Email,” March 13, 2005). The playwright creates a comic scene but one “with some grace” (“Email,” March 13, 2005).

A dependence of southern legendry is visible in the stories of Grayton Beach, as it was frequented by Al Capone. Grace and Grit is infused with local speech and local color. Like her Lancaster play, this one in Fort Walton exhibits a feminist element. Carson creates strong female characters, and throughout the play has a tendency to use women storytellers. The only recurring character is an African American midwife, whose scenes show her in opposition to the white establishment and at work in her profession. Surprisingly, in a scene Carson incorporates about baseball, she has the devoted fan be a woman and not the stereotypical male. In addition to the African American female midwife and the female baseball devotee, Carson gives the audience another powerful female character in the owner of the Grayton Beach resort. Through entrepreneurial vision during Prohibition, the proprietor turns her establishment into a gathering place for dances and good spirits. It is so famous, in fact, that the gangster Al Capone stops by for a visit. By populating Grace and Grit with such strong female characters, Carson adds a feminist perspective along with her usual oral history base and folklife details.

This brief look at her other work shows Carson can create diverse scripts in diverse geographic locations by modeling them after her Swamp Gravy plays. She continues to spread her community play recipe around the country and has been joined by other playwrights interested in similar work. When asked were there others writing the way she does, Carson replied, “I am sure there are other people working like I do, but I don’t
know them” (“Email,” October 4, 2000). She names Rebecca Ranson as a writer who uses oral history, “but in a very different way than I do it,” notes Carson (“Email,” October 4, 2000). She also mentions Jules Corriere of CPI, Megan Carney from Chicago, and Bobby Funk at East Tennessee State University as writers in community performance. “This kind of work has grown incredibly since I started, and this is just the beginning of a nationwide list,” she says (“Email,” March 14, 2005). Along with Richard Geer, other directors in this type of theater include Steve Kent, Jerry Stropnicky, and Maya Garantz. They rely on real people’s stories to create performance pieces. One such piece by Kent focused on gays in Montana. The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) has been making theater using homeless stories and homeless performers; Carson calls this project “very political work” (“Email,” October 4, 2000) while Scrap Mettle/SOUL had a similar thrust. Others are writing about a community or an event in a community with the work to be performed by actors. However, these works appear to be more author-driven, not community-based. Carson also notes Cornerstone Theatre, located now in Los Angeles, as somewhat similar to her work with community plays. According to Carson, this group will “take a piece from dramatic literature that has resonance in a community, rewrite it to fit that place, and do it with community people” (“Email,” October 4, 2000). For instance, coal town in West Virginia, where the mine had been shut down, and the economic base for the town was gone, used that approach. “It was a stunning idea that changed people’s lives in that place,” Carson remarks (“Email,” October 4, 2000). Corner Stone also has some multi-lingual productions based on real stories, she added.

Each of these projects has certain similarities to her Swamp Gravy work, but they are not exact replicas of the community performance play she created in Colquitt, Georgia. Neither are her plays written for any other community. Yet all of her work seems to start with her recipe tested with Swamp Gravy. There is a careful blending of folklife and oral history; then, depending on the community, she adds the optional ingredients, southern drama and feminism, because of who she is as a writer and as a person. Her association first with Dr. Richard Geer and then with other community performance directors has necessitated her script concessions for amateur volunteer casts. With this combination of folklife, oral history, southern drama, liberal feminism, and
community performance guidelines, Carson seems to give audiences a different kind of theater. Her plan is simple:

I ask, ‘What stories do we have to tell for a play to be about this place?’ It is a stunning question because I learn so much about how people perceive their place, and I go from there. I do try to honor what people tell me in answer to that question, but I’m never thinking about the elements of southern drama or folklife or any of that. For my money, that would be applying preconceptions, and I try to go to each project new. I do have my ‘box of secrets’ about how to make a show work, and I take that, but the ‘what stories’ question is the big one. (“Email,” March 14, 2005)

Carson now has a proven recipe for the community play, and she is not stingy with it. In addition to traveling around the United States to write for communities outside of Colquitt, Georgia, she has also mentored beginning playwrights to do likewise. Other writers associated with Geer’s Community Performance, Inc., have worked with Carson on scripts, and some, like Jules Corriere and Megan Carney, have gone on to create their own community performance pieces. In the home of Swamp Gravy where Carson first concocted her recipe, she also had an apprentice. When she first came to Colquitt, Carson was very clear that she did not intend to stay forever. Part of her vision for any community performance project is that the community itself will become artistically self-sufficient and that a local playwright will emerge. Carson prefers to lay the groundwork and then turn the project over to the community members.

After Carson left Swamp Gravy in 1998, I became the local playwright for Swamp Gravy, a daunting assignment for an untried amateur. I authored six plays, Brothers and Sisters with additional lines by Jules Corriere, Love and Marriage, Land Between the Rivers, The Beauty of It All (a tenth anniversary show that blended scenes from both Carson’s and my works), On the Square, and Down at the Depot. Corriere wrote the 2005-2006 play for Swamp Gravy, Nuthin’ But A Will, with Geer returning to direct.

Without qualification, I owe my stint as one of Swamp Gravy’s playwrights to Carson. In my early days with the project, she targeted me as her choice for the job; and when the circumstances dictated, she sent me forth with her blessings. She continues to be a generous teacher, offering both encouragement and practical advice to those who
seek her assistance. Each time I began to write for Swamp Gravy, I thought about Jo Carson and what she would do with a particular story. She was a hard act to follow. No one ever said of my southern expressions, “Oh, that’s a ‘Jones.’” Of Carson’s plays, Jim Ruth says, “There’s a piece of Carson in every one of them” (H1). And he is right; there is. Even though she is no longer the playwright for Swamp Gravy, there is still a piece of Carson in each of the new plays.

Her influence was always there as I followed her recipe for the community play. The tenth anniversary show, *The Beauty of It All*, was my greatest challenge as I tried to weave our work together in order to give the audience a representative sampling of the first ten years of Swamp Gravy. I had a tendency to stray from Carson’s preferred direct address and reliance on monologues to a more in-scene style. While she writes for casts with little or no experience in community performance, I inherited Swamp Gravy veterans who liked the interaction between characters in scenes. Her storyteller monologues and my acted-out stories seemed to flow well together in the anniversary play, a testament, I think, to my overall adherence to her formula. Like her, I always started with oral histories, but unlike her, who says she doesn’t think about such things when writing, I willfully embedded as many folklife and southern drama elements as possible. Since Swamp Gravy is known as the Official Folklife Play of Georgia, I always wrote conscious of that distinction. Carson professed to be a feminist out of necessity while I intentionally favored the feminist approach in both characters created and storylines developed. Just as Carson was before me, I was bound by Geer’s tenets of community performance and by the amateur cast of local volunteers. These limitations will always make this type of writing very interesting.

That swamp gravy I remember from those fish fries of my uncles now has a larger meaning for me and the people of Colquitt. Thanks to Jo Carson and others, it has become Swamp Gravy, the project that allowed me to write community play scripts for my hometown of Colquitt and nudged me to embrace an extended family of storytellers, storygatherers, professional artists, volunteer cast members, and stage crew. While I admire Carson’s work artistically, I also believe in it philosophically. Her community play is a literary achievement and so much more. With the elements of oral history, folklife, southern drama, and feminist theater and under the constraints of community
performance, she seeks to capture the flavor of a community. Year after year, Colquitt continues to stir up its Swamp Gravy. Carson has proven her recipe can be successful elsewhere. It has worked in Georgia, Illinois, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Florida, Virginia, and Kentucky, and it can work anywhere. Other communities have modified her basic ingredients to create their own community performance, and she welcomes all places to do the same. Any community willing to give it a try can cook up its own version of Swamp Gravy. Hers is a recipe that adapts to individual tastes, and like any good recipe, it should be shared with others and handed down from generation to generation. Jo Carson’s scripts for Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia, and for other places help communities strive for their own theater “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”
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Debra Calhoun Jones, a native of Colquitt, Georgia, is a teacher, editor, and writer. She received a BS and MS from Valdosta State in English education and later earned an MA in English with a concentration in literature from Florida State. As a doctoral candidate, her primary areas of study were drama and African American literature. Her dissertation focuses on the work of contemporary writer, Jo Carson, and her contribution to the oral history/community performance play, Swamp Gravy.

Jones is an instructor of English and humanities, currently employed at Albany Technical College in Albany, Georgia, and she also periodically serves as an adjunct professor for Bainbridge College, teaching rhetoric and composition courses. She is a member of the Georgia Council for the Teachers of English.

Her editing credits include four collections of oral histories for Swamp Gravy: Folk Tales of South Georgia, The Gospel Truth, Good, Good Medicine, and Claiming Kin. For over twenty years, she was managing editor of a weekly newspaper, the Miller County Liberal, and edited an article by Richard Owen Geer that was published in Drama Review.

In academic writing, she collaborated with Geer on an article entitled, “Gathering Mayhaws: Jo Carson and Writing for Community Performance,” which appeared in The Iron Mountain Review in 1998. When she turned to playwriting, her first work for Swamp Gravy was Brothers and Sisters with additional lines by Jules Corriere. She also authored Love and Marriage, Land Between the Rivers, On the Square, and Down at the Depot and created the script for Swamp Gravy’s tenth anniversary show, The Beauty of It All, in which she incorporated scenes written by Jo Carson and herself. As a consultant for another Georgia community, she wrote a script for guided tours of Turner County’s Museum of Crime and Punishment and a play based on the stories collected about the history of the jail in Ashburn, Georgia. Castle Turner has yet to be performed. An avid interviewer herself, she has also led several storygathering workshops.