

White playwright's got his Mojo working; [FIN Edition]

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Martin Jones admits he raised a few eyebrows with *West Memphis Mojo*, a play about the aspirations of three black musicians in the mid-'50s.

"The first two productions," says Jones, "I think there was some suspicion among the black actors. I sensed they were thinking, 'This is our story - why are you writing it.'"

As a white playwright, Jones risked falling into a trap that has snared several writers trying to document the history or experiences of another culture. Witness the furor surrounding the Oscar-nominated *Mississippi Burning*, a movie condemned by many for a revisionist historical perspective that credits white liberals for instigating the U.S. civil rights movement.

"I understand why black leaders are upset with it," Jones says. "When you see that film you think, if it wasn't for those over-zealous FBI agents there never would have been a civil rights movement.

"If it had been poorly made, you could just dismiss it. But the fact that some care had gone into it and that there's some good writing and good performances makes it even more troubling."

Jones need not apologize for his credentials as the author of *West Memphis Mojo*, which makes its Canadian premiere tonight at Theatre Passe Muraille, 16 Ryerson Ave.

The son of a field engineer for a chemical company, Jones moved around a lot as a child, living in various places, including Memphis, Tenn.

It was there that he developed an abiding passion for gospel and rhythm and blues music while listening to Nashville's WLIC, a radio station targeted mainly at black servicemen stationed in the south. He also remembers seeing the young and suddenly sensational Elvis Presley roaring around Memphis on his spiffy new motorcycle.

West Memphis Mojo is set just across the state line in a West Memphis, Ark., barbershop. It's 1955 and Presley has just made his first splash with a Sun Records' cover version of black bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama."

This comes as exciting news to other black musicians - in this case Teddy (played by Jeff Coopwood), Elroi (Richard Yearwood) and Frank (Tyrone Benskin) - who fantasize about the fame and fortune that awaits them if only a popular white singer would record one of their songs.

Jones was inspired to write the play in 1985 while living in Florence, Italy, where his wife, an art historian, was on sabbatical. Suffering from an acute case of blues deprivation, he headed out to a local club to hear the "Chicago Blues Band."

"It was five Italian guys who called themselves the Chicago Blues Band," he recalls. "They barely spoke any English but they had learned, note for note, very accurate renditions of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf songs from records.

"I talked to them a little bit afterwards and I was fascinated that there was such a reverence for black American roots music from people like that in Italy."

West Memphis Mojo is also rooted in Sun Records' boss Sam Phillips' oft-quoted 1954 remark: "If I could only find a white man who could sing like a black man, I could make a million dollars."

If the approval of the black community is a measure of Jones' success in documenting the racism inherent in that statement, the writer has struck the right chords. After opening in Chicago in 1986, the award-winning play went on to become the first work penned by a white playwright to be staged by New York's Negro Ensemble Company.

Jones hopes his success will be an encouragement to others.

"The next barrier we need to overcome," he says, echoing the sentiments of Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang, "is the notion that only minorities can write about the minority experience."

West Memphis Mojo, directed by Brian Richmond and Peter Hinton and featuring Nicky Guadagni, will continue to April 2. For tickets (\$6-\$16), call 363-2416.