

The Lively Arts



Dr. Louis D. Mitchell, University of Scranton English professor, will be humming his own tunes as he attends 'Star of the Morning,' which opens Wednesday off-Broadway in New York City. Why? Because he wrote most of them for the show which depicts the development of black music from 1895 to 1907. (Terry Connor photo)

Tuneful Adventure Excites U of S Professor-Composer

When the musical "Star of the Morning" opens Wednesday in New York City, a University of Scranton faculty member will hear 16 of his songs performed.

Dr. Louis D. Mitchell, professor of English at the U of S, composed all but one of the show's tunes. Collaborators included Romare Bearden and Clyde Fox.

"'Star of the Morning' depicts the development of black music from 1895 to 1907," says Dr. Mitchell. "The central character is Bert Williams, a turn-of-the-century vaudevillian who was the first black actor to be integrated into an all-white play."

The "book" for the play was written by Dr. Mitchell's brother, Lofton, who is known for his Broadway hit of the early 1970s, "Bubbling Brown Sugar."

"Star of the Morning" will open at the "No Smoking Playhouse," an off-Broadway theater at 354 W. 45th Street.

"We are hoping to attract backers to either take the show on the road or to Broadway," says Dr. Mitchell.

Composing the songs for a musical is just the latest project for Dr. Mitchell in a busy career. A prolific writer, researcher, musician and composer, Dr. Mitchell is also active in social causes. Last week he was elected to the national board of directors of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

"That's actually much more important than the opening of a play," he

says.

Dr. Mitchell, 54, has lived in Scranton for 24 years but says it is still not "home."

That title is reserved for Columbus County, North Carolina.

"It's the climate," he explains. "I'll never get used to the climate up here."

Yankee weather may be one of the few things to which Dr. Mitchell cannot adapt. He is blind and has been since his teen years.

Born in a rural area of southeastern North Carolina, Dr. Mitchell was the fourth of nine children in an area populated by three primary families: the Spauldings, Moores and Mitchells.

"I don't know anyone in that area without Spaulding, Moore, or Mitchell blood," he says.

The closeness of the Columbus County community has many assets, he notes, among them strong family ties. It also has disadvantages. There is a hereditary tendency toward an eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa among the local residents who are descendants of black, white and Indian ancestors.

As a boy, Dr. Mitchell's eyesight was extremely poor. By the age of 12, it was obvious he was going blind. His parents moved the family to New York for better educational opportunities and Dr. Mitchell earned his high school diploma from the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind.

He became totally blind at age 15,

committing to memory many sights — such as paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art — before the disease's ravages became final.

He attributes much of his creative drive to a strong sense of visual memory.

"When teaching literature, or when writing or composing, you practice your visual memory," he says. "Milton went blind, too. He was blind when he wrote 'Paradise Lost.'"

Dr. Mitchell's research interests include 17th and 18th Century literature, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and Dr. Aaron McDuffy Moore, co-founder of the largest black-owned life insurance firm in the nation. Dr. Mitchell is currently writing a biography of Dr. Moore.

Dr. Mitchell balances a full undergraduate teaching load with his writing, research and composing interests. He makes an annual trip to Spain to do much of his writing because, until recently, Spain offered an opportunity for privacy.

"Not anymore," he laments. "People know my telephone number over there now."

Students at the University of Scranton are making plans to travel to New York to see Dr. Mitchell's latest creative effort. Sigma Tau Delta, the English honorary society, is sponsoring a bus tour to see "Star of the Morning" in early May.