

Slide 2: Agenda

Introduction
History of Snake Handling in Appalachian Churches
Salvation on Sand Mountain
Mud Nostalgia
Snake Handling in Churches Today

Slide 3: Mercury Seven with Signs Following

This talk is about the making of a play. Two plays, actually, which when paired together are called *Mercury Seven with Signs Following*. The first play, *Middle True*, is the story of a young woman's road trip across America. Contemplations on relationships, abandonment and the seemingly-impossible space flight of astronaut John Glenn combine to tell a powerful story of love and loss. The second play, *Mud Nostalgia*, is a play that explores themes of memory, ritualistic religious practices, and the complex connection between people and their environments. Set in Appalachia, the play combines poetic language and symbolic imagery to portray a community shaped by both natural beauty and economic hardship. It is known for its distinctive approach, using nonlinear storytelling and experimental staging to evoke a sense of nostalgia and reflection.



But first, a little background . . .

Slide 4: Snake

The practice of snake handling in Appalachian churches is a distinctive religious tradition that developed in the early 20th century within certain Pentecostal and Holiness Christian



communities. The history of snake handling is deeply intertwined with interpretations of scripture, cultural identity, and the religious fervor of the region. Today the practice is most common in Southern Appalachian states, and snake handlers often use native rattlesnakes and copperheads. Such churches are independent, and often call themselves “signs following” churches.

Slide 5: Scripture

Snake handling in religious services is based on a specific passage in the *New Testament* of the Bible, particularly Mark 16:17-18, which states:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

This verse, along with a few other supporting texts, is interpreted by some believers as a directive to demonstrate faith and trust in God’s protection.

Slide 6: Hensley

The practice is believed to have begun with George Went Hensley, a Pentecostal preacher from Tennessee, in the early 1910s. Hensley recounted an experience where, while on a mountain, a serpent slithered beside him. Hensley purported to be able to handle the snake with impunity, and when he came down the mountain, he proclaimed the truth of following all five of the signs in Mark. Hensley himself later died from a snake bite. This practice soon spread to rural Appalachian communities, particularly in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, and West Virginia.



George Went Hensley

Slide 7: Revival

Appalachian snake handling emerged within a framework of Holiness-Pentecostalism, which emphasizes direct, personal experiences of God through acts such as speaking in tongues, divine healing, and other demonstrations of faith. The practice became a powerful symbol of piety and the belief in divine protection in communities that often experienced economic and social hardship.



Slide 8: Snake handling image

Snake handling is considered a test of faith. Believers contend that true Christians, who are anointed with the Holy Spirit, will be protected from harm when handling venomous snakes, such as rattlesnakes or copperheads. They describe the feeling they get when they are handling snakes, "Like a high, but a greater high than any drug or alcohol. It's a feeling of joy, peace, extreme happiness." He said that many snake handlers believe that when God anoints them, they will be protected, but they still recognize there is danger. For instance, if the spirit leaves them and they don't put down the snake quickly enough, they could be bitten. Other signs of faith might include drinking poison (usually strychnine) or laying hands on the sick to heal them. These rituals are part of vibrant, emotional church services, accompanied by singing, speaking in tongues, and rhythmic music.



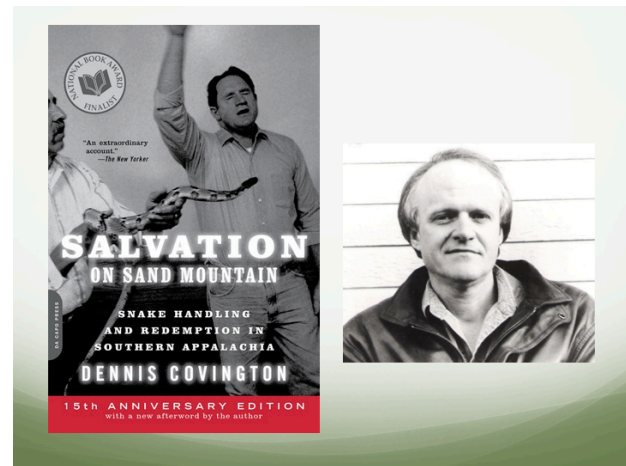
Slide 9: PLAY MOVIE EXCERPT (7:31-9:40)

From the mid-20th century onwards, snake handling faced increased legal scrutiny due to safety concerns. Several states enacted laws to prohibit the handling of poisonous snakes in religious

services, citing public health and safety. Despite these legal barriers, snake-handling churches often continued to practice clandestinely. Tragedies involving snake bites and fatalities have periodically drawn media attention, reinforcing both public fascination and concern over the practice.

Slide 10: Book

Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia by Dennis Covington is a compelling non-fiction work that delves into the mysterious and often misunderstood world of snake-handling churches in the Appalachian region. First published in 1995, the book is part memoir, part investigative journalism, and part exploration of faith, culture, and human resilience.



The book begins as an investigation into the trial of Glenn Summerford, a preacher in an Alabama snake-handling church accused of attempting to murder his wife by forcing her hand into a cage of venomous snakes. Covington, initially covering the story as a journalist, becomes increasingly intrigued by the practice and the people who embrace it as part of their religious expression.

The book was a finalist for the National Book Award and praised for its honest depiction of Covington's own struggles with faith. It remains an important work for understanding the intersection of religion, culture, and human experience in the American South.

Slide 11: Glenn Summerford

A preacher in the Church of Jesus with Signs Following in Scottsboro, Alabama, Glenn Summerford is a central figure at the start of the book. His trial for the attempted murder of his wife serves as the initial impetus for Covington's investigation. Summerford's complex character embodies themes of power, faith, and human fallibility.



Glenn Summerford
Preacher and Convicted Felon

Slide 12: Darlene Summerford

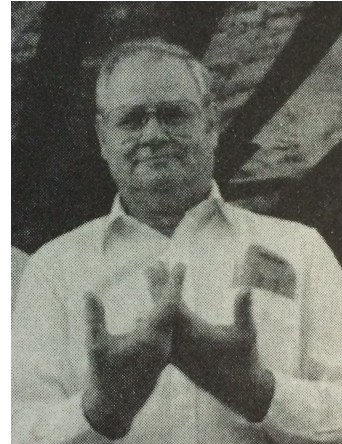
Summerford's wife, Darlene, plays a significant role as the victim in the case that draws Covington into the world of snake handling. Her experiences highlight the darker aspects of life within a snake-handling community, such as domestic strife and religious coercion.



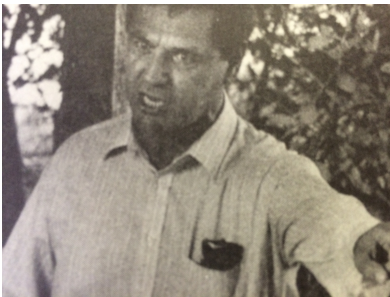
Darlene Summerford
Snakebite Victim

Slide 13: Carl Porter

A prominent snake-handling preacher and one of the influential figures in the community Covington explores, Carl Porter serves as a more balanced and thoughtful counterpart to some of the more extreme personalities. His leadership and dedication to the practice showcase the sincerity and resilience of the snake-handling tradition.



Brother Carl Porter
Pastor in Kingston, Georgia



Charles McGlocklin
The End-Time Evangelist

Slide 14: Charles McGlocklin

An elder and respected figure in the snake-handling community, Charles McGlocklin is a steady presence who represents the spiritual and cultural depth of the practice. He is someone Covington comes to respect and learn from, embodying the faith and conviction that underpins snake handling.

Slide 15: Punkin Brown

Another key snake handler, known for his devout adherence to the faith and charismatic presence. Brown's dedication to the practice and his eventual fate (he would later die from a snakebite after the events of the book) underscores the inherent dangers and the level of commitment involved in the practice.



Punkin Brown
Pastor, Rock House Holiness Church

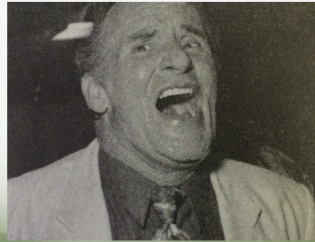
Slides 16-19: Other members of the community

Covington interacts with various members of the snake-handling churches, each contributing unique perspectives that shape the overall portrayal of the practice. These individuals add depth to the narrative, showing a range of motivations, levels of faith, and personal struggles.

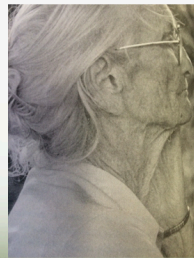
Aline McGlocklin
True Believer and Handler



Brother Bob Stanley
"Spread the word!"



Aunt Daisy
The Prophetess



Rayford Dunn
Snake Handler



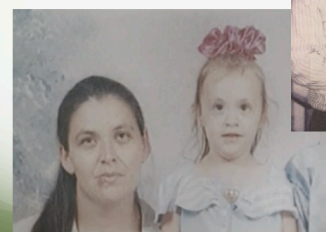
Slide 20: On a Personal Note . . .

I read Dennis Covington's book shortly after it came out in 1995 and it impacted me greatly. I had been raised in Oklahoma in a fundamentalist denomination that believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible and eschewed instrumental music in worship, promoted the dominance of men over women, and forbade dancing, mixed swimming, drinking, and other "pursuits of the flesh." True, no snakes were handled in our church, but in many other ways Covington's book resonated with me – and I remembered it.

Slide 21: Melinda and Punkin Brown

Fast forward to the year 1998. I awoke one morning to an NPR news segment on the death of Punkin Brown. Brown's wife, Melinda Brown, a 28-year-old mother of five, died in 1995, two days after she was bitten by a rattlesnake during a service. John Wayne "Punkin" Brown, continued to handle serpents after his wife's death. He was killed by a snake in 1998, at the age of 34,

Punkin and Melinda
Brown



while preaching at an Alabama church. His last words to the congregation were, “No matter what else, God's still God.” Brown’s death orphaned their five children.

Slide 22: Mud Nostalgia

Punkin Brown’s death and the trial of Glenn Summerford propelled me into a project that would explore women in snake-handling churches in Appalachia, matters of faith, love, and betrayal, and include autobiographical elements from my own upbringing. I turned to theatre historian, poet, and playwright Mark Evans Bryan. He wrote my play.



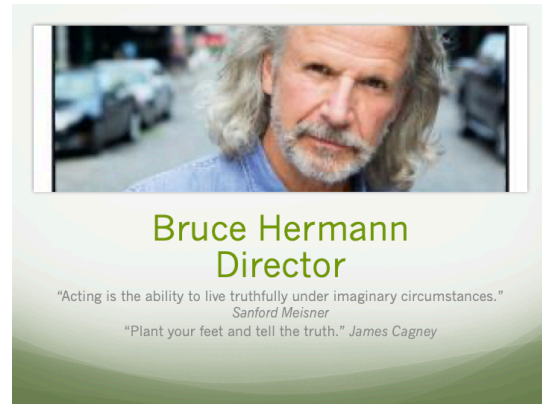
Slide 23: MEB

Bryan’s writing in *Mud Nostalgia* is often described as lyrical, rich with imagery, and evocative of Appalachian folklore. The play unfolds in fragments, with the character speaking in monologues that reveal personal stories, dreams, and memories. The narrative is layered, giving the audience a sense of drifting through time and memory, as if sifting through layers of mud to find meaning.

“Everything I write is bleak. I like finding beauty in representations of sadness.”

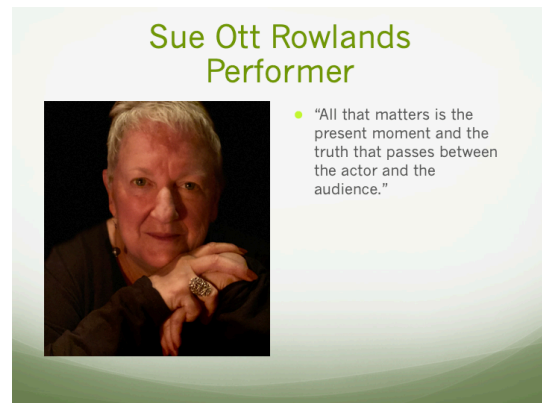
Slide 24: Bruce

New York-based director Bruce Hermann has been most notably associated with *Mud Nostalgia* and, following the world premiere in 2003, has been attached directorially to the project.



Slide 25: SOR

I hold the exclusive performance rights to *Mud Nostalgia*.



Katrina Powell, Scholar and Collaborator

- "The stories we layer together make a narrative of our lives."



Slide 26: KP

Scholar Katy Powell has collaborated with me in writing about the creative process associated with the play, including an article in the literary journal, *Liminalities*, on the importance of archive in the creative process. More about that later.

Slide 27: The story of the play

Mud Nostalgia centers on the life and memories of an Appalachian woman who recounts her experiences growing up in a rural, often isolated community and the devastating betrayal she experienced at the hands of her husband. The play opens with the woman onstage alone in a pool of light.

Slide 28: Woman

(Imagine a Woman,
standing in front of you.
Imagine she is surrounded by love
and family truer than blood.
Imagine she's imagining joy
for the first time, joy.
Imagine that love and family
and joy
flows through her fingertips
from the scales like soft leather
of Nahasch, sinuous and straining,
a writhing, perfect pit viper,
God, the father and the son,
God, the spirit,
in blessed trinity,
in the belly of the serpent.)

Imagine that was long ago.
Imagine now that . . .
Imagine your throat is scratchy
from an open window and a cold night,
so you curl your tongue to the back
and scratch that whale bone
in the middle of the roof of your mouth
but it doesn't do any good.
Imagine that, back and forth.

Imagine she was ever so in love
with a man in a brown suit.
Imagine a shade tree,
painted all over with poster paint.
Imagine what men can do.



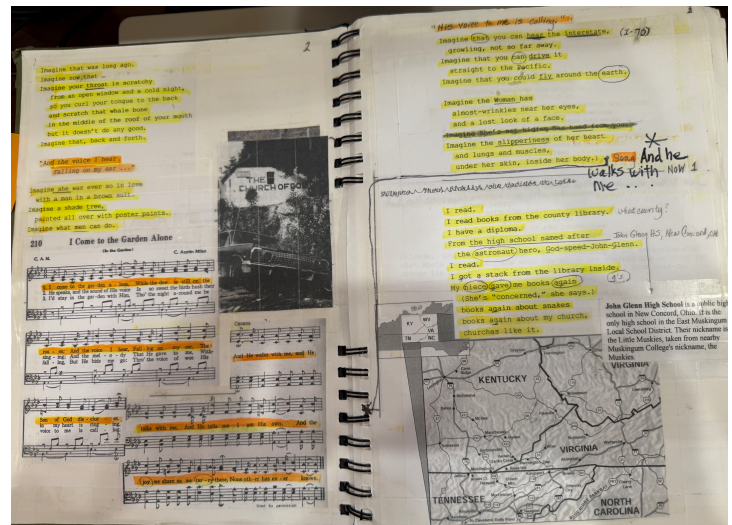
Imagine that you can hear the interstate,
growling, not so far away.
Imagine that you can drive it
straight to the Pacific.
Imagine that you could fly around the earth.

Imagine the Woman has
almost wrinkles near her eyes,
and a lost look of a face.
Imagine the slipperiness of her heart
and lungs and muscles,
under her skin, inside her body.)

Slide 29: Text

I read,
I read books from the county library.
I have a diploma.
From the high school named after
the astronaut hero, God-speed-John-
Glenn.
I read.
I got a stack from the library inside.
My niece gave me books again
(She's "concerned," she says.)
books again about snakes
books again about my church,
churches like it.

The one that people had
checked out the most, 'bout people down South,
that book talks about
putting glass bottles in trees.
Bright, shiny bottles
to gather in evil spirits and hold 'm,
out in the yard.
The shinier the better, the book says.
(In the language of Genesis, in the language
of the Jews,
Nahasch means "serpent," but it also
means "shiny one." Huh.)



That excerpt from the play constitutes the opening moments. We are introduced to the Woman and begin to have glimpses into her world. The story navigates the Woman's personal history, the changing landscape of Appalachia, and the struggles that arise from both the physical and emotional "mud" she feels trapped in.

Slide 30: Singing

I'm singing tonight at the service.

I sing.

In a white clapboard church. (Up route 40, past the giant steam shovel, over the Muskingum River, left at the brick house, watch the dip. End of the road.) Church of the Heavenly Star Traveler with Signs Following. By the closed up Sohio.

Pentecostal-Holiness.

Charismatic.

American.

Church with Signs Following.

Some people say a "snake-handling" church.

(Do you call a Catholic church a "wine-drinking church"?)

No. You don't.

That's not blood, that is wine.
And they give it to children!

It makes a difference of course
what you call a thing.

"Snake handling."

Makes it dirty.

Makes it a sight to see.

Makes it a thing for the media to scrutinize.

Makes you forget it's a holy thing,
prescribed and called for in the Bible,
the Book of Mark,
a ritual,

like taking the wafer and the grape juice,
like having services at dawn on Easter,
like bringing green bean casserole
to the pot-luck . . .

There have been 22 articles on the so-called snake-handling churches in that New York paper in the last five years. I know. My sister's girl works the reference



desk at the branch library They got all that on computers. (She's the one brought me the books. The books about "snake handling." "Library of Congress," she says, "when you look up your church," she says, "it tells you to "See Snake-cults." "See snake-cults.") Of those 22 news articles, 19 of them was about court cases. Abuse. Attempted something by snake. Endangerment. Negligence. Accidental death. Attempted murder. Attempted murder.

That's one.
That's the one they write articles about.
Wayward, evil men who rattle cages.
Alabama. North Georgia.
Far from O-hi-o.
Dirty hands forced into
home-made pine and chickenwire boxes
full of cottonmouth babies.
Praying Christ Jesus is looking another way
or that His hands are around her throat too.
Hillbilly sheriffs file hillbilly reports.
"The Woman without
the spirit
when she took up the beast.
Every couple of years
someone far away from here
someone nothing like you
uses the Book of Mark
like a goddamn grizzly bear's mouth.
(Please excuse my language.)
Every couple of years,
someone far away from here
someone far away from here.

Sorry.
I'm a little bit hot about it.

Slide 31: Snake shadow

Key themes in *Mud Nostalgia* include:

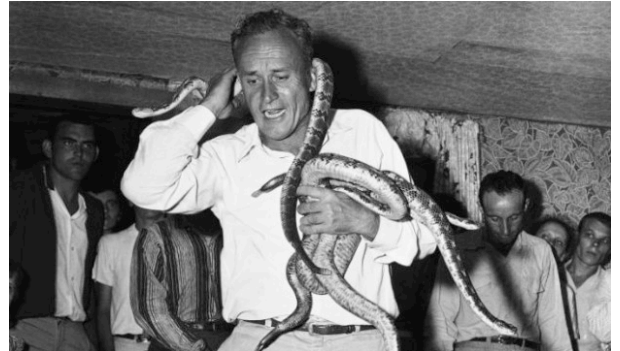
1. **Nostalgia and Memory**
2. **Connection to Land**
3. **Identity and Belonging**
4. **Love and Betrayal**

Slide 32: Man

When I saw men take up snakes again,
it was with my husband.



I remember
(longer and longer ago)
that
ninth-grade-zero-sum-fight-to-the-death
to pair up
(for a homecoming dance, for a Friday night,
for what seems like a lifetime), and
that when the lotto of it falls on your number
and you and he are officially officially
going here or there together,
it just doesn't matter who he is.
because every day
you like it a little bit more
and every day
you feel less like one of the barbarous people
until you'll be with someone
just because he showed up,
just because his suit matches your dress.
And your fourteen-year-old self convinces
your fifteen-year-old self
that
this is very, very good.



See, it's tricky.

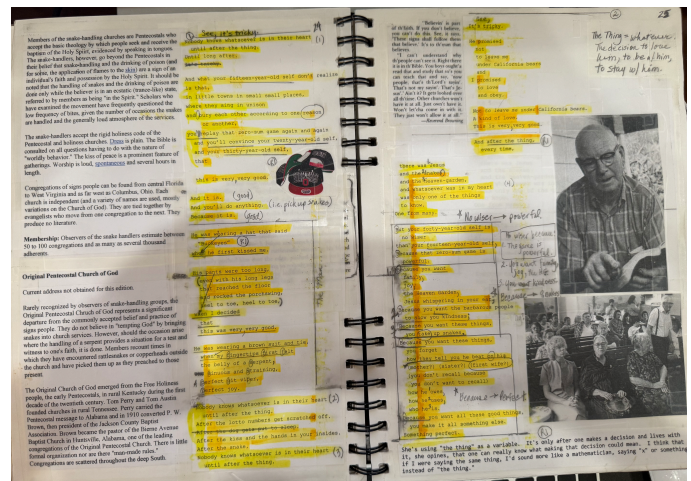
Slide 33: Text

Nobody knows whatsoever is in their heart
until after the thing.
Until long after.

And what your fifteen-year-old self don't realize
is that,
in little towns in small small places,
where they sing in unison
and bury each other according to one reason
or another,
you'll replay that zero-sum game again and again
and you'll convince your twenty-year-old
self,
and your thirty-year-old self, that

this is very, very good.

And it is.
And you'll do anything.



Because it is.

He was wearing a hat that said
 "Buckeyes"
when he first kissed me.
His pants were too long,
 even with his long legs
 that reached the floor
 and rocked the porchswing,
 heel to toe, heel to toe,
when I decided
 that
 this was very very good.

He was wearing a brown suit and tie
 when my fingertips first felt
 the belly of a serpent,
 sinuous and straining
 perfect pit viper,
 perfect joy.

Nobody knows whatsoever is in their heart
 until after the thing.
After the lotto numbers get scratched off.
After the kiss and the hands in your insides.
After the snake.
Nobody knows whatsoever is in their heart
 until after the thing.
See, it's tricky.

He promised
 not
 to leave me
 under California bears
and
I promised to love and obey.

Not to leave me under California bears.
A kind of love.
This is very very good.

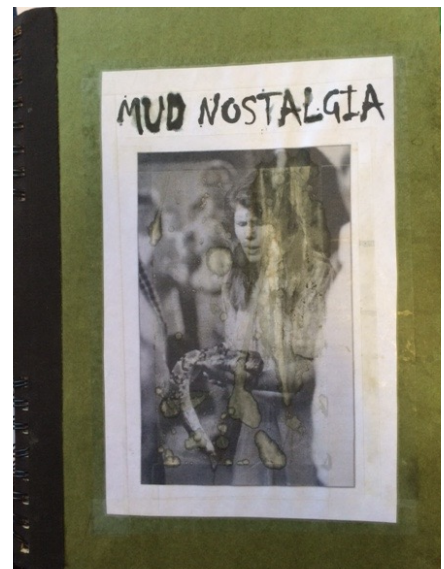
And after the thing,
every time,
there was Jesus
and the snakes
and the Heaven-garden,

and whatsoever was in my heart
was only one of the things to know.
One from many.

But your forty-year-old self is
no wiser
than your fourteen-year-old self,
because that zero-sum game is
powerful.
Because you want
family,
joy,
the Heaven Garden,
Jesus whispering in your ear.
Because you want the barbarous people
to show you kindness.
Because you want these things,
you take up snakes.
Because you want these things,
you forget
how they tell you he beat on his
(mother?) (sister?) (first wife?)
(you don't recall because you don't want to recall)
how he owes,
how he uses,
who he is.
Because you want all these good things,
you make it all something else.
Something perfect.

Slide 34: Mud Nostalgia

Mud Nostalgia has been appreciated for its deep empathy and nuanced portrayal of Appalachian life. It resonates with audiences who have experienced rural or economically struggling areas, and it invites viewers to consider how environments and histories shape personal and collective identities. Through its experimental approach, the play encourages a sensory experience of Appalachia, bridging gaps between folklore, personal memory, and the universal desire for connection.



Slide 35: Snake Handling Churches Today

The faith grew to such an extent that several states—including Kentucky and Tennessee, but not Alabama—passed laws making it a crime, although prosecutions are rare. Today, snake handling continues to be practiced by a small number of churches in Appalachia, primarily among independent, closely-knit congregations. These churches often operate outside the purview of

mainstream religious organizations and maintain a deep sense of tradition and secrecy. Although many modern Pentecostal and Holiness denominations do not practice snake handling, it remains a poignant symbol of faith for those who do.



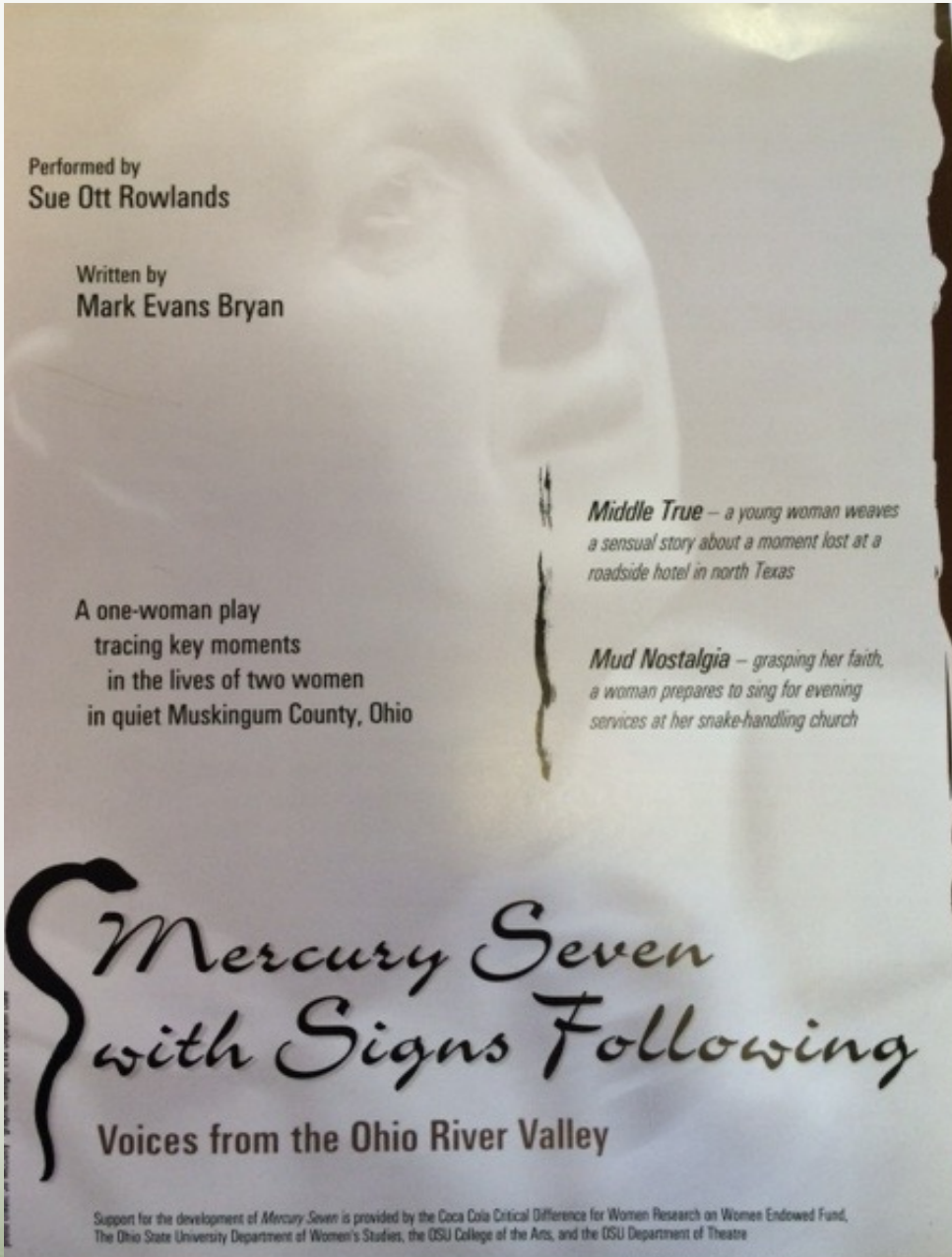
An estimated 2,500 people belong to snake-handling churches, mostly in the Southeast. Because the handling of snakes is a demonstration of faith, most who are bitten refuse medical attention (although a recent article documented a change in this stance). Over 100 practitioners have died since the turn of the century, says Dave Kimbrough, author of "Taking Up Serpents."

The practice of snake handling has been depicted in various books, documentaries, and films, which often explore the tension between religious freedom and public safety, as well as the unique cultural heritage of Appalachian religious life. Writers and researchers have studied it as an example of religious extremism, folk tradition, and cultural resilience in a region shaped by isolation and economic hardship.

Snake handling remains a vivid example of how literal interpretations of scripture can shape religious practice, highlighting the powerful role of faith, community identity, and resilience in Appalachian religious traditions

Slide 36: The End

Appendix



Performed by
Sue Ott Rowlands

Written by
Mark Evans Bryan

A one-woman play
tracing key moments
in the lives of two women
in quiet Muskingum County, Ohio

Middle True – a young woman weaves
a sensual story about a moment lost at a
roadside hotel in north Texas

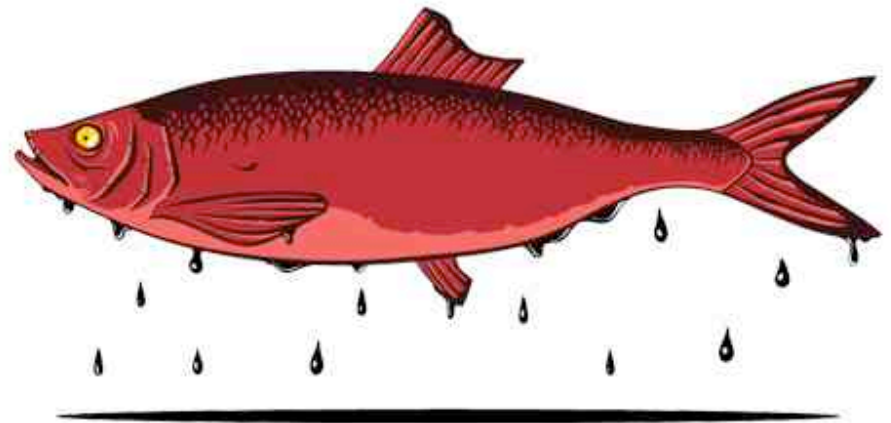
Mud Nostalgia – grasping her faith,
a woman prepares to sing for evening
services at her snake-handling church

Mercury Seven
with Signs Following
Voices from the Ohio River Valley

Support for the development of Mercury Seven is provided by the Coca Cola Critical Difference for Women Research on Women Endowed Fund, The Ohio State University Department of Women's Studies, the OSU College of the Arts, and the OSU Department of Theatre

*Mercury Seven with Signs
Following Premiere, 2003*

THE RED
HERRING



Mercury Seven with Signs Following in India, 2003



THE HINDU

THEATRE group Chetna, in association with Spandan, presents a powerful play "Mercury Seven with Signs Following" on July 26 at Gyan Manch. The play is to be directed and enacted by talented American actress Sue Ott Rowlands.



Mercury Seven with Signs Following in Taiwan, 2003




Mercury Seven with Signs Following in New Zealand, 2003





Homebody at Maszk Theatre in Hungary, 2006



**Kortárs Előadóművészeti Központ
a szegedi Régi Zsinagógában
(Hajnóczy u. 12.)**

ALTERRA

**2006. SZEPTEMBER 29.
PÉNTEK, 20.30**

**SUE OTT
ROWLANDS (USA):
THE HOMEBODY**

*ANGOL NYELVŰ SZÓLÓELŐADÁS
A SOLO THEATRE PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH*

SZERZŐ: TONY KUSHNER/RENDEZŐ: ELYSA MARDEN

Sue Ott Rowlands a Toledói Egyetem (Ohio) színházi tanárkének professzora és gyakori színész, aki magyarországi előadói turnéja keretében látogat el Szegedre. A darab, amelynek szerzője, Tony Kushner, ismert kortárs dómáíró Amerikában, egy magányos, elidegenedett, „otthonlú” angol házasszony története, aki a misztikus Afganisztánról érkezve szembevív saját élete sikertelenségével, és döntő lépésre határozza el magát... Sue Ott Rowlands színpadi játékát elismerő kritikák fogadták mind hazájában, mind külföldi fellépései során egyaránt.

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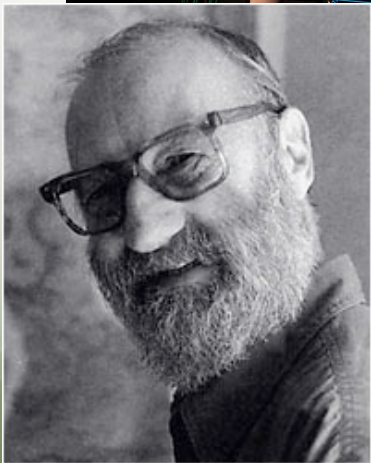
TÁMOGATÓK: Nemzeti Kulturális Örökség Minisztériuma (Országos és Kulturális Minisztérium), Szegedi Pályázati Hivatal, Szegedi Könyvtár- és Művelődési Központ

MÉKTÁMOGATÓ: Szegedi Kávé

The Homebody in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2008



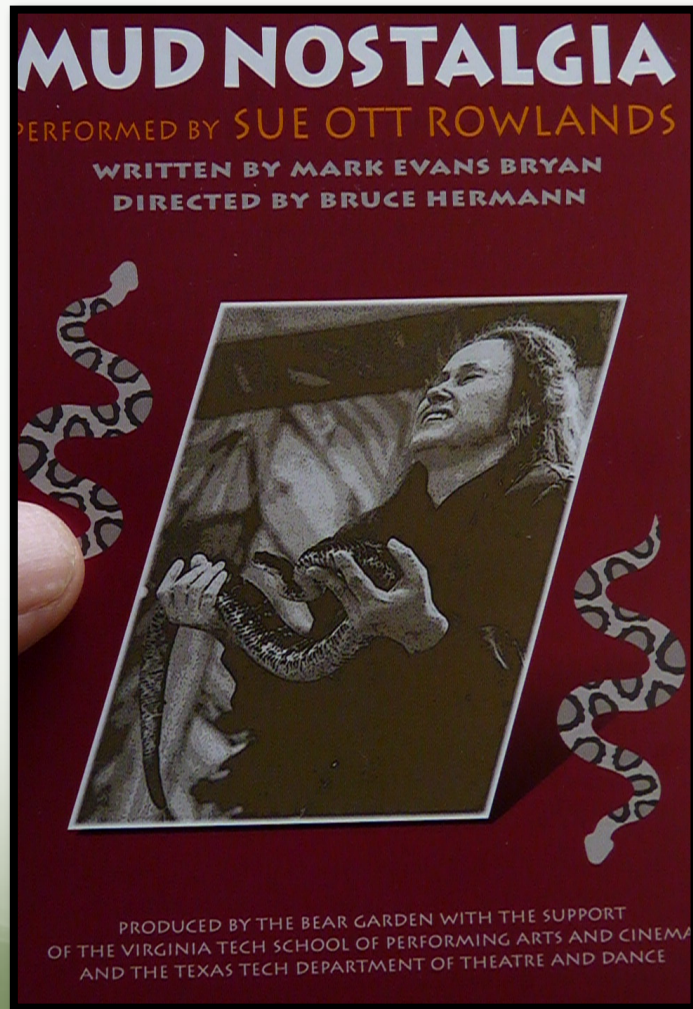
fig.1 at Divadlo Inspirace in
Prague, 2010



Homebody at Helga's Folly in Sri Lanka, 2014



Mud Nostalgia at Kampa Divadlo in Prague, 2011



Mud Nostalgia
Northern Kentucky University, 2015

