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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
‘Three Fat Frogs’

Tale of amphibians and aliens to be narrated by story’s author

BY KIM GRIZZARD
The Daily Reflector

When author Willa Brigham got an invitation to work with dancers to bring one of her children’s stories to the stage, she jumped at the chance.

Brigham’s “Three Fat Frogs,” choreographed and performed by the Signature Dance Company, made a splash last year when it was performed at the Dunn Center in Rocky Mount. Now the tale of amphibians and aliens has landed a spot in the lineup of East Carolina University’s Family Fare Series.

Brigham, an award-winning storyteller, will narrate the production, which begins at 7 p.m. Friday in Wright Auditorium on campus.

For Brigham, a singer, inspirational speaker and children’s television host, sharing the stage is a bit of a leap of faith. The Tuskegee, Ala., native, who now makes her home in Raleigh, has a tendency to tell her stories ad lib. Working in the scripted environment required for a dance performance can be the artistic equivalent of wearing a straitjacket.

“I literally read the story,” Brigham said. “I can’t change what has been written; you cannot go off course.

“I can be restrained for a while,” she said, laughing, “if that’s what it takes for them to do a beautiful performance.”

The idea for the performance originated at a Rocky Mount storytelling festival, where Cindy Mancini, artistic director for the 2-year-old Signature Dance Company, heard Brigham spinning one of her yarns. Mancini picked up one of Brigham’s CDs and heard “Three Fat Frogs.”

“I thought it would make a good children’s production,” Mancini recalled.

... There are a lot of comic aspects to it that I think adults can enjoy.

“It was a story that was very cute, and it had unusual characters,” she said. “The characters were memorable. It was a simple message: cooperation.”

It was the same concept Brigham and Signature Dance Company used to take “Three
Fat Frogs” from an oral story to an on-stage setting.

“Willa really just gave us her blessing and said, 'Go ahead,'” Mancini said. “She allowed us to use our imaginations. Really she just trusted us to go ahead and do it.”

Before she began working with Signature Dance Company on “Three Fat Frogs,” Brigham had never put her tale in writing. She could simply alter the story at will, changing characters’ names or adapting the story in subtle ways to whatever audience happened to be listening.

Brigham, a former teacher, said some of her best story editing has been done in collaboration with children in the audience.

“When I’m creating something new, I go and let the children hear it because children are honest,” Brigham said. “They’re not politically correct. It allows me, especially with the children, to create something that would be interesting to them.”

Brigham said Signature Dance Company created something from “Three Fat Frogs” that she never envisioned.

“I never thought of dance,” she said. “When I saw them dance it as I was narrating, I was just as enthralled as the audience.”

“It was a wonderful combination. It blended very well.”

Even her toughest critics — children — seem to agree. Their only criticism?

“One little girl said, ‘Ms. Willa, your frogs are not fat,’” Brigham said, laughing. “I said, ‘They went on a diet and ate better.’”

Willa Brigham
author

Contact Kim Grizzard at kgrizzard@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9578.
Even Harvard feels pain from slowing economy

BY RODRIGUE NGOWI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Harvard University is considering spending cuts because the economic slowdown may reduce federal grants and the school’s substantial endowment, President Drew Faust said Monday.

Harvard’s endowment posted an 8.6 percent return and grew to $36.9 billion in the fiscal year that ended June 30. The school, however, lost 12.7 percent on its U.S. stock portfolio and 12.1 percent on its foreign equity portfolio during that time. Faust’s spokesman on Monday declined to say much the endowment has lost during the current economic turmoil.

Still, Faust warned in an e-mail to faculty, staff and students “we must recognize that Harvard is not invulnerable to the seismic financial shocks in the larger world. Our own economic landscape has been significantly altered.”

“We need to be prepared to absorb unprecedented endowment losses and plan for a period of greater financial restraint,” she said.

Harvard’s is the nation’s largest university endowment and provides about a third of the annual operating budget. Faust said the school is looking at ways to cut spending and will review compensations costs, which account for nearly half of the budget.

Harvard also is reviewing its ambitious expansion program, including plans announced early last year to expand across the Charles River from its Cambridge campus into Allston, she said.

“We will need to plan and act in ways that reflect that reality, to assure that we continue to advance our priorities for teaching, research and service,” she said.

The school intends to implement initiatives to make education affordable to students from low- and middle-income families, and will ensure that those with income below $60,000 will pay nothing to send children to Harvard College. Those earning up to $180,000 can expect to pay no more than about 10 percent of their income, she said.

Graduate and professional schools will keep financial aid budgets at current levels.

Harvard’s efforts to address the economic downturn mirror what is happening elsewhere in the country, including other Ivy League schools. While wealthy schools can fare better in a downturn, they are also seen as vulnerable to prolonged market slumps because they tend to fund a greater portion of their budget from their endowment.

“Virtually every college and university, their budgets are under strain, stress, for a variety of reasons,” said Matthew Hamill, a vice president of the National Association of College and Business University Officers.
Dangerous budget knife

When state government’s purse strings are being tightened in response to a dramatic falloff in revenues, there is bound to be pain. But here’s the question: Will that pain be metaphorical, or will it be real?

Just to pick one possible example among many, consider the inconvenience and frustration that could well be experienced by students if spending cuts within the University of North Carolina system reach into classrooms.

An unfortunate situation, to be sure. But in terms of hurtful impact, a course that’s missing from the next semester’s catalog doesn’t compare with a missing meal.

In fact, as The N&O’s Thomas Goldsmith reported yesterday, the state’s budget restrictions now taking hold are cutting into programs such as Meals on Wheels. Whether anyone has gone hungry yet is hard to know, and certainly the dedicated folks who operate Meals on Wheels would do everything in their power to keep that from happening.

But that program — a lifeline for vulnerable older people who no longer can easily manage a trip to the grocery store or a stint in the kitchen — is the kind where a cutback in public support can do tangible damage to somebody’s physical well-being. The old, the young, the sick, the destitute — it’s the vulnerable among us who have to be shielded when government spending must take a hit.

A whole range of social services could get caught up in the budget squeeze, with $2 million in funding now being withheld. Besides Meals on Wheels, the money helps pay for home health care aides, senior and adult day care centers, and transportation — to a group meal, for example, or to a doctor’s office. And as officials who operate these programs point out, it’s far better to help people who are at risk of eating poorly, for example, before a deficient diet leads to illness requiring more intensive health care.

North Carolina’s pending budget woes are serious, and Governor Easley is being prudent in requiring state agencies to dial back their expenditures. But those cuts can’t be of the one-size-fits-all variety. Priorities must be set, and those programs aimed at keeping vulnerable people safe and well must go to the top of the list.