



## Wesley's words



Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger

Actor BJ Johnston of Jackson plays the role of Methodist founder John Wesley in the one-man play, *The Man From Aldersgate*, at the Chateau Ridgeland retirement community. A former missionary, Johnston will perform the play five times around the metro throughout the month.

## Play tells story of one of Protestant Christianity's most influential men

By Jean Gordon  
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RIDGELAND — Dressed in a white wig and tall black boots, BJ Johnston walked among the crowd in Chateau Ridgeland's dining room telling the story of one of Protestant Christianity's most influential men.

"I felt my heart strangely warmed," Johnston said, playing the role of John Wesley. "I felt I did trust in Christ, and Christ alone, for my salvation."

Since last spring, Johnston, 60, has been bringing Wesley's words to life through the one-man play, *The Man from Aldersgate*. Though Wesley is known as the founder of the Methodism, Johnston's performances have drawn diverse audiences including Bap-

tists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and people who don't adhere to any particular faith.

**ONLINE**  
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**Video:** Actor BJ Johnston performs and discusses his one-man play

including performances at Belhaven College and Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Lakeside Presbyterian Church and St. Peters by the Lake Episcopal Church in Brandon and Edwards United Methodist Church

in Edwards.

Johnston has appeared in more than 50 theater productions throughout the United States.

Before moving to Jackson five years ago, the Seattle-area native served for 13 years as a missionary in Hawaii, directing the Youth With a Mission College of the Arts at the University of the Nations. In Jackson, he formerly worked as the director of development for the arts at Belhaven College.

Though he's not a Methodist, Johnston said he related to Wesley's conversion story and believes anyone can draw inspiration from learning about him.

"Beyond my own study of Wesley, I really See **PLAY, 2D**



# Play: 'Creative way to get to the truth'

## From 1D

began to understand more about his life as I read and I began to see there's a tremendous story here," Johnston said.

Born in England in 1703, Wesley was an Anglican minister who led a religious revival that started the Methodist movement in England and the United States.

*The Man from Aldersgate* was written by playwright Brad L. Smith and is compiled directly from Wesley's journals.

At the beginning of the play, Wesley stops at an inn to rest his horses. When he looks up and discovers the audience, he begins to share his life story.

Former Belhaven College dean of the arts Colin Harbinson, who now runs a global arts partnership based at the college called StoneWorks, has seen the original version of the play.

"Wesley was a major influence in the Christian world and this play really captures the essence of his character and his mission," he said. "I think it's history and art and entertainment wrapped up in one, with theology being a very strong part."

Harbinson worked with Johnston during the 1990s launching major arts festivals in such countries as Russia, China and Bul-



Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger

Actor B.J. Johnston says people of all faiths can relate to the one-man play he performs about the life of Methodist founder John Wesley because it's a story about transformation.

■ **What:** B.J. Johnston performs *The Man from Aldersgate*, a one-man play about the life of John Wesley.

■ **When and where:**  
■ 5:30 p.m. Jan. 9, Lakeside Presbyterian Church, Brandon, (601) 992-2891.  
■ 5:30 p.m. Jan. 16, St. Peters by the Lake Episcopal Church, Brandon, (601) 992-2691.  
■ 11 a.m. Jan. 22, Bel-

haven College Center for the Arts, Jackson, 1-800-960-5940.

■ 5:30 p.m. Jan. 23, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Jackson, (601) 956-4553.

■ 6 p.m. Jan. 27, Edwards United Methodist Church, Edwards, (601) 940-3635.

■ **Cost:** Free.  
■ **Phone:** Call (601) 951-1761 or visit [www.kareproductions.com](http://www.kareproductions.com).

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"B.J. is a very accomplished artist," Harbinson said. "He has always wanted to use that in the context of his Christian faith and his life."

Johnston has been performing the play mostly in churches around Mississippi and in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Indiana

and Seattle.

He recently staged the play at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Jackson.

"I was kind of blown away when I saw it," said St. Luke's pastor the Rev. Heather Hensarling. "One of the things that was so powerful about it was unlike another one or two Wesley interpretations I've seen, B.J. used actual text from journals and letters."

Hensarling said Johnston's performance drew mostly church visitors who sat in rapt attention during the 50-minute performance.

"You really do get a deeper sense of the struggle of John Wesley in his own commitment," she said.

Johnston said the arts can be a powerful vehicle for delivering God's message.

"I encourage people to see the arts as a viable way not so much to preach but to see truth and depict beauty," he said. "I see drama like that, as a creative way to get to the truth."

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To comment on this story, call Jean Gordon at (601) 961-7291.