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STAGE & DANCE

### Actress will honor grandmother who 'defied social convention' with Central KY performances

BY KARLA WARD

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Rose Buckner, left, a Chicago actress and playwright who grew up in Lexington, is bringing the story of her grandmother Olivia Buckner, who grew up in Bourbon County, to Central Kentucky. *Photos submitted*

Rose Buckner never got to meet her grandmother, but she wants others to meet her, in a manner of speaking.

Buckner, a Chicago actress and playwright who grew up in Lexington, has written a script based on her grandmother's life story, and she'll be performing readings of it at several Central Kentucky libraries this month.

"The Reigning Belle of the Bluegrass Region" tells the story of Olivia Buckner, a Bourbon County native who "defied social convention and risked death threats to marry a Japanese seminary student in 1903," according to promotional materials for the show.

Buckner said her grandmother's story is "still relevant today" in its themes.

"Racism is not a thing in the past," she said. "What do we do when someone just looks so different from us that we are uncomfortable with it?"

Buckner said that growing up in Lexington, her father often told stories about his parents, who "were so unusual for the time."

She said her grandmother was teaching Sunday School at the Cane Ridge Meeting House when her future husband, a charming young seminary student, came there to preach.

"He was just so brilliant," Rose Buckner said. "The family loved him and embraced him ... until he wanted to marry her."

Buckner said her grandmother had always been a bit of a rebel. "The family had a pet goat, and they named the goat after her," she said.

But Olivia Buckner was not going to be deterred.

While she doesn't want to give away too much of the story, Rose Buckner said her grandparents were subject to backlash over their relationship that reverberated for a long time.

She said her grandmother did not become bitter, but instead remained an "open-hearted" person whose story is important to share.

"I was so lucky to grow up hearing stories that inspired me," Rose Buckner said.

After growing up performing in the Lexington Children's Theatre and attending Sayre School, where her father was on the faculty, Rose Buckner went on to college in Illinois and later ran a theater company.

She said she began doing oral histories and using the interviews to write plays. She taught in a facility for young female offenders in Chicago, helping them turn their life experiences into a play that aired on public radio.

Throughout her career in theater, Buckner said she often has been thinking, "How can I give a performance or write a play that will inspire people to look at their own lives?"

After her father died, Buckner said she began interviewing people and digging deeper into her grandparents' story. She performed an early draft of "The Reigning Belle of the Bluegrass Region" in 2005.

Now, she said, she's excited, anxious and having "bittersweet" feelings about bringing the story back to the place where it happened.

Buckner said the one-woman show is "really about the human experience. What is our purpose? I believe our purpose is to love ... to connect and to learn."

Her goal for audiences as they come away from the show?

"I'd like them to have an experience of my grandmother's spirit," she said. "I would like to make her visible. I think that will inspire people."

Performances of "The Reigning Belle of the Bluegrass Region" are at 2 p.m. March 11 at the Paris-Bourbon County Library, 6 p.m. March 14 at Midway University, 2 p.m. March 18 at the Lexington Public Library's Central Branch and 6 p.m. March 20 at Paul Sawyer Public Library in Frankfort.

Performances are free, but preregistration may be required.

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