

The Hampton Years Discussion follows performance

Sunday, Jan. 31, 2 pm, Virginia Stage Company, Wells Theater

Many periods of history have brought African Americans and Jewish Americans together. The two communities share common bonds of often feeling like strangers in their homelands, and sadly, also feeling discriminated against and sometimes oppressed or even enslaved. Most people know how the Jewish community worked hard to support the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, but few are aware of what happened just a few decades earlier.

In the 1930s, with Nazi persecution of Jews in high gear in Germany and later Austria, many Jewish scholars sought refuge in the United States. While quotas and antisemitic and anti-immigrant sentiment kept Jewish professors off of the faculty at many major universities, they often found acceptance and support at historically black colleges and universities. Jacqueline Lawton's play, *The Hampton Years*, now at the Virginia Stage Company, explores the influence of one such scholar, Austrian Jewish refugee painter and educator Viktor Lowenfeld, on the development of great African American artists such as John Biggers and Samella Lewis.

Lowenfeld left Vienna in 1939 and was hired as a psychology professor at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), where he also offered art classes. These classes elicited such enthusiastic responses that Lowenfeld eventually founded the college's art department and educated a generation of artists, including Biggers and Lewis, at Hampton and later, at Penn State University.

Perhaps Lowenfeld's most famous protégé, John Biggers, intended to become a plumber. But when he took Lowenfeld's drawing class in 1941 at Hampton Institute, Biggers' life changed. He went on to become



John Biggers, seated, with *Mother and Child* painting on easel, 1944. Art Instructor Viktor Lowenfeld (second from left) encouraged the students to express their frustration with poverty and other conditions of oppression in the South. (Standing far right are Frank Steward and Ada Ferguson Vann.) Photo: Hampton University Archives

a renowned artist, as well as chair of the art department at Texas State University.

Focusing on the pivotal years at Hampton Institute during WWII, this richly researched tapestry of African American luminaries such as Biggers, Lewis, and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, reveals the dreams and travails of young artists in a still segregated society, while examining the impact of World War II on a Jewish immigrant and his wife finding shelter in the U.S., and his profound influence in shaping the careers of African American students.

Sponsored in part by the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater's Community Relations Council and Holocaust Commission, in partnership with Congregation Beth El's HAZAK, the Urban League Guild, and the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC), the performance on Sunday, Jan. 31 will be followed by a discussion led by Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities.

For more information about the play or to reserve tickets (use code SAVE20 to save 20% off tickets) for this performance and discussion, visit www.VirginiaStage.org or contact Gaby Grune, CRC program associate at 965-6107 or GGrune@ujft.org