

Black Theater Workshop weaves

# strands of life

into an award-winning production

During the fall 1990 semester Professor Clyde Ruffin and his student Eric L. Wilson sifted through Ruffin's research papers on the lives of African-American men and the effects of slavery to write a play for Black History Month in February 1991. "A lot of the history of the African-American male is just gone," says Wilson, AB '91, who is now in an acting internship with the St. Louis Black Repertory Theater.

From the sketchy bits and pieces, Wilson wove together *Strands*, a historical and emotional presentation that has played to sellout crowds in Columbia and was one of five national winners in the American College Theater Festival. The winners performed at the Kennedy Center in Washing-



ton, D.C., April 23 and 24. Only one other MU production, *Eleven-Zulu*, staged in 1984, received that honor.

Behind the award-winning play stands its award-winning director. Chairman of the theater department, Ruffin won one of 10 William T. Kemper Fellowships this year. This is the second year the \$10,000 awards have been given to MU faculty for teaching excellence with a \$500,000 gift from the William T. Kemper Foundation.

In the 10 years since Ruffin started the Black Theater Workshop, he has earned his students' devotion. "One of the main points of the play is about fatherhood and teaching the young," Wilson says. "One of the greatest gifts he gave me during the play was when he called me son."

Ruffin's character in the play, the Weaver, reflects his ability to take 10 students, only one of whom is a theater major, and knit them together into a hit play.

"We have stumbled upon a magic formula — to tell a story that is rooted in black experience but also has universal appeal," Ruffin says. "The experience is unique to black Americans but applicable to all people because of the relationships shown between fathers and sons."

Throughout the play, the Weaver follows the Prince, who symbolizes the African-American man throughout history, taking from him strands of cloth. These he forms into a robe that eventually liberates the Prince from his turmoil. The play follows the Prince across the centuries from

the time he is snatched by slavers from his home in Africa to his evolution into an angry youth of today — and most of all as a man struggling to discover his identity.

For the actors, the message rings true. When they first arrived in Sioux Falls, S.D., for the regional contest, no one said a word to them, Michael Watorson recalls. "We were just a bunch of black guys who rolled into town with our boom boxes and everything. Then later on everyone finds out we aren't just what they are thinking. We have a man who is in hospital management, another who is in aquatic toxicology, and another's an engineer. You got all these different people, but all you have to do is sit down and talk to them and you learn that. That's what *Strands* says." □

## The playwright



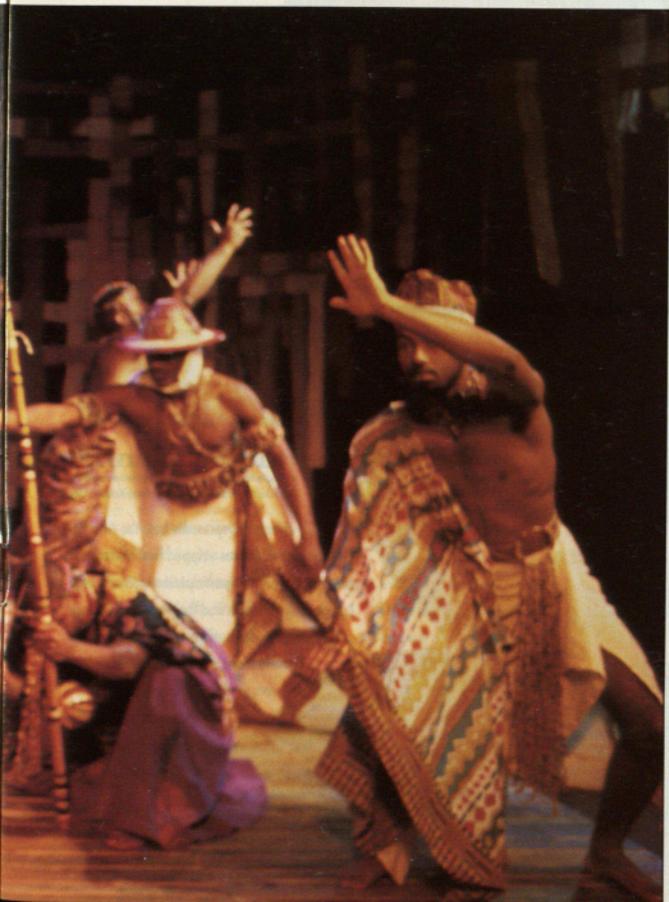
"I've got a whole new understanding about who I am as a black person and about manhood itself and what it entails. I found out that we have a lot of preconceived notions about manhood. When you have a historical understanding of what these men have done, you begin to understand what it means to be a man." — Eric Wilson

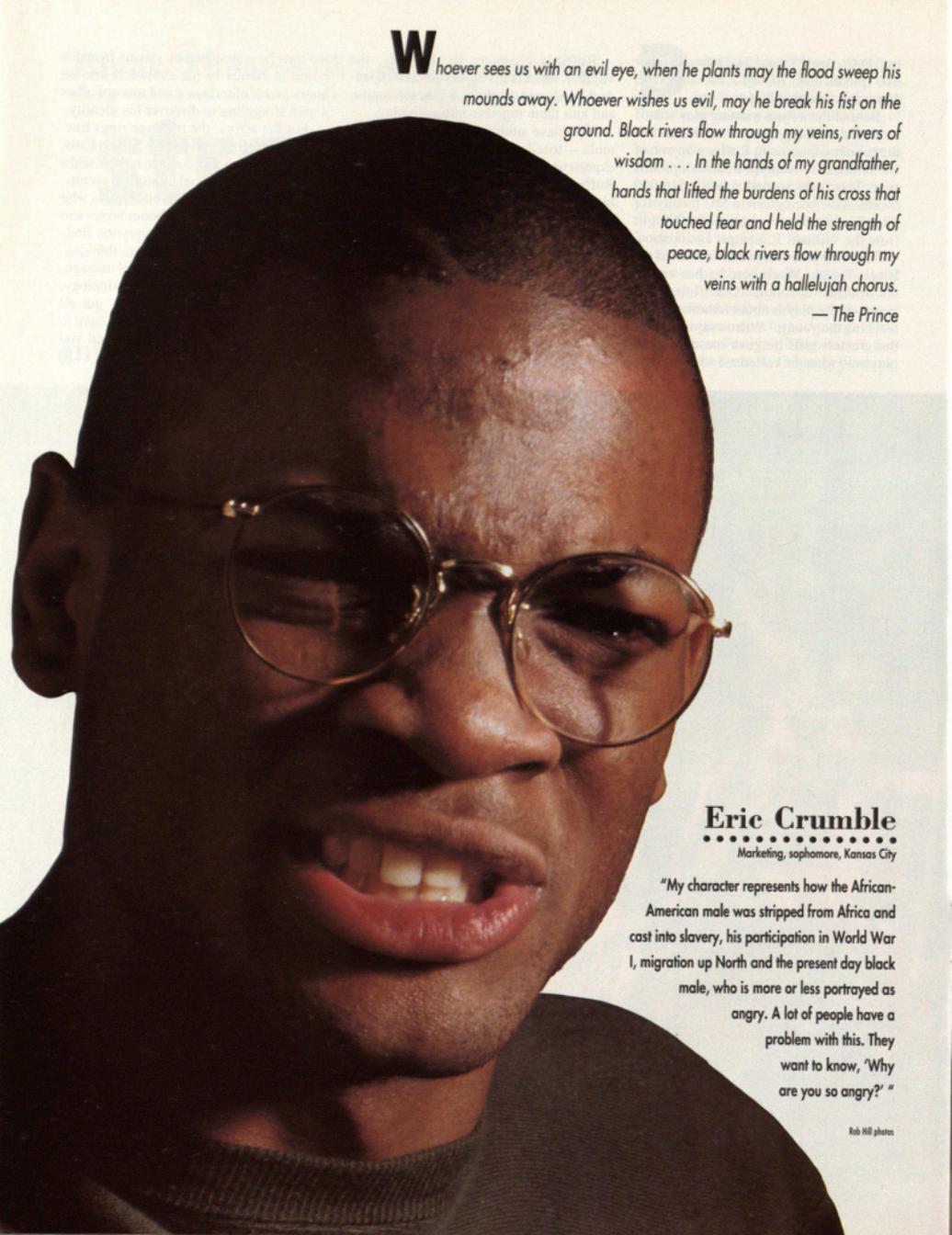
## The cast

Professor Clyde Ruffin, front, was the guiding force behind the original MU production, *Strands*, which has been performed for more than 6,300 people. The student members of the cast include from left: Michael Miller, Darryl Swint, Barry Ford, Charles Davis, Eric Crumble, Marvin Davis, Mark Thomas, Michael Watorson, Freeman Ryland and Karl Thomas.

Tammy Atkins photo

STORY BY JOAN M. MCKEE





**W**hoever sees us with an evil eye, when he plants may the flood sweep his mounds away. Whoever wishes us evil, may he break his fist on the ground. Black rivers flow through my veins, rivers of wisdom . . . In the hands of my grandfather, hands that lifted the burdens of his cross that touched fear and held the strength of peace, black rivers flow through my veins with a hallelujah chorus.

— The Prince

## **Eric Crumble**

Marketing, sophomore, Kansas City

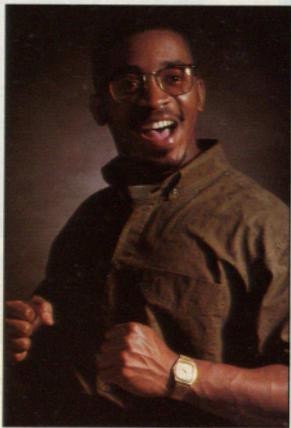
"My character represents how the African-American male was stripped from Africa and cast into slavery, his participation in World War I, migration up North and the present day black male, who is more or less portrayed as angry. A lot of people have a problem with this. They want to know, 'Why are you so angry?'"

Rob Hill photos

**I** 'member one mornin' that he call my name, grab me by the arm so tight I thought I might had done somethin' wrong. He look me in the eye and says, 'Boy 'member, whatever you do, wherever you go, keep family together.' That was the last time I saw him, cause that same night, they come for him and Pawpaw was beat till dead. The next day I was sold. — Slave

**I** understand the plethora of idiosyncrasies in man's innermost existence. The complexities of time and space. I know Darwinism first hand. I understand iambic pentameter. I scream in sonnet form. I've heard Ravel's Bolero and understood and dissected the beat. In fact, 'To be or not to be' ain't no question, it's a hypothesis of being. And that is why . . . I can kick a little ass if I have to. — Angry youth

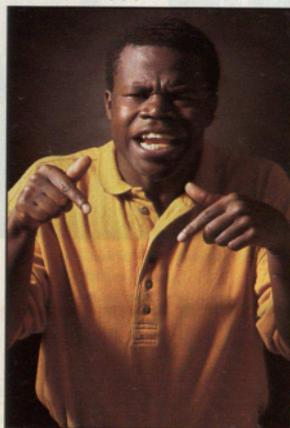
**M**y knowledge goes beyond the slave shores of 1619. My knowledge was born in the womb of an African star that enlightened civilization lasting more than 200 years guiding man to spirit and spirit to man. — Street gang member



## Michael Wotorson

Political science, graduate student, Kansas City

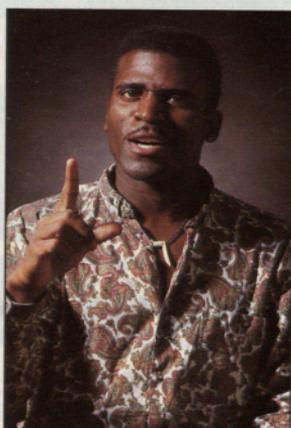
"This is a very male-oriented society, but black men are denied the opportunity to be men, to provide, to protect and to care — economically, socially and politically. *Strands* is a collective yelling of black men. 'Stop the world. Let me speak. I'm tired of this.' I'm not sure a lot of times people get that, or they may get it and choose to ignore it."



## Michael Miller

Theater, senior, St. Louis

"The play is a rally cry, a call, to black men to remember that their purpose in life, like everyone's purpose, is to grow, to learn and to share and to empower themselves in a way that will continue the race, to make it strong, positive and fruitful."



## Marvin Davis

Health services management, junior, St. Louis

"What came out of the African culture and the culture of slavery is the African drums that never stopped beating. You can't get away from this soul. The soul is always there, the soul of that heartbeat, it just keeps on beating. You can't get rid of it. You can't get rid of a culture that's been here since the beginning of time."