

Theatre Project Presents a Provocative Production!

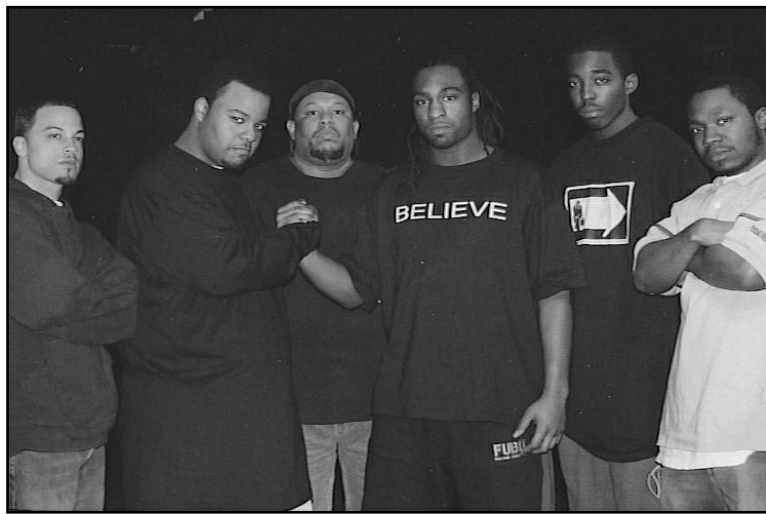
By Lorenzo C. Handy

Theatre Project has long been known as Baltimore's "fringe festival." Located in Midtown in the heart of the Mt. Vernon/Mt. Royal Cultural District, this unique performing art venue has been doing so for 34 years. It presents cutting edge performing arts in a professional yet laid-back and professional atmosphere. It is dedicated to presenting a wide array of work by established and emerging artists from the region, the nation, and the world. Often, engagements include discussions with the artists, as well as workshops or other outreach activities.

In the summer of 2003, Theatre Project presented A Real "Nigga" Show, a choreopoem (poetry, music and movement), performed by an All-Male Cast. This talented, young, local cast brought ensemble comedy and hip-hop choreopoematics, hot in pursuit of America's most powerful colloquialism: the "n-word." It's a theatrical collection of "short stories," some of which are funny and some of which are poignant, and which delivers experience and perspective on how this one word can take on so many different meanings. At the time of its premiere, it played to enthusiastic and packed houses.

BTP Producing Director, Anne Cantler Fulwiler, said, "we just had to bring it back for our Subscription audience. It's an excellent piece of writing, really tight ensemble work, and an accessible way to face some difficult stereotypes that exist within Black America and between Black and White communities. It's all good!"

The cast features Joshua Dixon, Robert Lee Hardy, Ezekiel Jackson, Malik Maloney, Melvin T. Russell, and Joshua Dixon from HBO's hit series, "The Wire." Troy Burton, who conceived and directed the show, is Program Director at the Eubie Blake National Jazz and Cultural Center. Underlying this play, is a quote from Dick Gregory: "The word "Negro" is an adjective-and has only within the last half century become used as a noun. Webster's white dictionary says so. But, the word "Nigger" is, and always has been, a noun. No



(L to r) Malik Maloney, Joshua Dixon, Robert Chew, Robert Lee Hardy, Melvin T. Russell, and Ezekiel Jackson Courtesy Photo

People can be adjectives, if that People are "For Real." Igger is a state of Being." Whereas "Negro" is simply a state of a Nigger's mind."

The performers recognize that the word is seen by many as pejorative. However, they have determined to demonstrate that the word can and is, often, used as a symbol of strength and pride. Of course, we have to admit that this is not universally accepted, even among Black folks! Nevertheless, Troy Burton explains that he chose the title and changed the word's spelling to get people to think and to let the hip-hop generation know that their stories are worthy of being put on stage.

The script consisted of about thirty-six short prose pieces, poems and original sketches. Distinguished African American poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes' works are represented and quoted. A number of notable African American orators, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., comedians and hip-hop stars were used in sound bites.

There was so much individual and collective energy and talent on stage, that for me, at least, it was often overwhelming. I was particularly moved by Melvin Russell's visit to a father, whom I assumed was in jail, and who had originally loved and idolized him. He informed his father that because he had abandoned him, he now hated him. And, that by so doing, the father had lost a son as well as his own heart! Equally poignant, were the words by a biracial student. He stated that he

had been called, among other things, a "zebra." I especially related to that episode, inasmuch, as I have had eight interracial marriages in my own family and have observed much of this same reaction.

It was significant that this cast was able to effectively portray the entire range of folks who make up our race. They were small children, teenagers, twentysomethings, and senior citizens. In each instance, they were very believable.

I attended the student matinee performance and was interested in their reactions to the play. For the most part, I felt that they clearly understood the author's intent. However, my one reservation, would be that I might have excised the very graphic sexual scene for that performance. Of course, I'm aware that today's teenagers are well aware about sex. Nevertheless, I'm not certain that I would have wanted my students to have seen that particular scene if I were still teaching.

Finally, reminiscent of ancient Greek drama, there was a recurring choral refrain: "You thought I was him..." However, each answer was a refutation of long held stereotypes. The final question seemed to sum up the play's thesis as its answer: "You thought I was him...but I'm me!" I left this production feeling confident that our next generation will be able to pick up the gauntlet and move forward! My advice to Theatre Project: Keep bringing "cutting-edge" theatre to Baltimore!!

18 Ancestors Village, Ancestors Cinema Club, Screening of "African Origins of Free Masons," 7pm-9pm, 208 S. Pulaski St., (410) 362-2777

18, 19 Black Engineer of the Year Career Fair, recruiters from 100 top employers and academic institutions, F, 9am-3pm, Sa, 10am-4pm, Baltimore Convention Center, 1 W. Pratt St., (410) 244-7101, www.beya.org

19 Consortium of Information and Telecommunications Executives, Black History Month Bus Tour, Phillip J. Merrill, 9am-3:30pm, 3701 Koppers St., (410) 393-2337, www.cite-md.org \$



Wild Zappers

The Walters Art Museum, African American Family Day, 10am-4pm; Auditorium: 11am, Schroeder Cherry and his puppet theatre; 1pm, Tewodross Melchishua, film artist; 3pm, The Wild Zappers, deaf dance group; Sculpture Court: Noon, African Heritage Dancers and Drummers; 2pm, Keter Betts Trio; Studio A: 10am-4pm, Sonya Clark, The Beaded Prayer Project; Studio B: 10am-4pm, Art Activity; Time to be determined: Monalisa DeGross, Reading/Book Signing of "Granddaddy's Street Songs," 600 N. Charles St.



Poet Langston Hughes

Banneker-Douglass Museum, Saturday Film Series: "Voices and Visions: Langston Hughes' Life and Work," examines ideas about Black creativity in Hughes' life and work, 12:30pm, 84 Franklin St., Annapolis, MD, (410) 216-6180

Johns Hopkins University Gospel Choir and the Black Student Union, "The Black Jubilee," a collaboration among the gospel choirs

and dance ministries of local colleges and universities in the Baltimore community and surrounding area, 6pm, Glass Pavilion, Levering Hall, Johns Hopkins University, 3400 N. Charles St., (410) 516-5473, www.gospel@jhu.edu

20 The African American Patriots Consortium, Inc., Annual Buffalo Soldiers Memorial Dinner, Winners of Essay Contest: "African American Women in Defense of America," The Sheaton Barcelo Hotel, Annapolis, MD, \$



Community College of Baltimore County, Essex, DJ Workshop, featuring Washington hip-hop legend Ron Brown, 11:30am-1:30pm, B Building, Second Floor Lobby, 7201 Rossville Blvd., Essex, MD, (410) 780-6572

22-27 Washington Performing Arts Society, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Judith Jamison, artistic director, Masazumi Chaya, associate artistic director, Tu, 7pm, W,Th,F, 7:30pm, Sa, 1:30pm & 7:30pm, Su, 1:30pm, The Kennedy Center Opera House, 2700 F St., NW, Washington, DC, (202) 785-9727, www.wpas.org \$

The African American Tourism Council of Maryland, 6th Annual Black History Month Fundraiser & Program, Tri-County "Travel & Tourism" Reception: Anne Arundel, Baltimore & Howard, light fare dinner, networking hour, tourism presentations, door prizes, 5:30pm-8:30pm, Patapsco Manor-Classical Banquet & Conference Center, 5695 Main Street, Elkridge, MD, (410) 783-5469, email: aatcomd@aol.com \$

24 Verizon Complex, "Mosaic of the Motherland: A Montage of Music, Drama, Verse, Drama, and Design," Collective Voices: Sistah Joy, Billye O'Kera, & Lady Di; Malcolm X Drummers and Dancers; fashion models and music, 5pm, Chesapeake Complex, 1st Floor Dining Area, 13100 Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD, www.cite-dcmetro.org

For the complete calendar go to www.btimes.com