**Channeling James Baldwin and his life Author's in actor/playwright James Ijames' "artistic DNA."**

January 12, 2010|By Lewis Whittington FOR THE INQUIRER

Before the collective closet burst open, Truman Capote and James Baldwin were two authors who spoke to gay America not only through their writings, but also with the force of their fearless personalities. Capote was TV's fey mascot who could intellectually slay anyone in his path, Baldwin a black civil rights activist whose novel Giovanni's Room presented a frank, moving view of gay life.

The writers are the focus of two one-man plays being presented in repertory by Mauckingbird Theatre Company this month. One, opening tomorrow, is a rare revival of Jay Presson Allen's Tru, directed by Tony Braithwaite and starring Chris Faith as Capote; the other, opening Thursday, is the world premiere of The Threshing Floor, written by Philadelphia actor James William Ijames, who also stars as Baldwin and a large roster of other characters.



Last week Ijames was on stage at the Adrienne Theater with director Brandon McShaffrey, working out text changes before previews began. McShaffrey said he was contemplating "moving some of the characters around" and noted that "James is being really cooperative, which is not always the case with playwrights."

While Tru is a monologue set on a single night, Christmas Eve 1975, The Threshing Floor requires Ijames to voice 14 characters in a time frame that stretches from Baldwin's 1930s Harlem childhood to his life in France, which began in the late '40s and ended there with his death at 63 in 1987.

For the actor/playwright, who got his Temple master's of fine arts degree in 2006 and will turn 29 tomorrow, the piece reflects an ongoing literary affair with Baldwin. "I read Go Tell It on the Mountain when I was 13. He's part of my artistic DNA," Ijames said, and it was necessary for him to fall out of love with Baldwin in order to "play him as a flawed human being dealing with a lot of anger."

The title refers to "this place become true and righteous," he said. "It's about being shaken to your core.

"It started as The Immaculate Heart of James Baldwin, which was too long and bad," he said with a laugh. "Baldwin talks so much about his experiences in the black church, which is so important to me as well, as an artist and African American."

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The play pointedly deals with the prickly subject of gay black men and their experiences within the African American community. A key scene has Eldridge Cleaver confronting Baldwin about his homosexuality, which the then-Black Panther in fact did, in a 1968 polemic in Soul on Ice in which he said it reflected Baldwin's "agonizing, total hatred of blacks."

Ijames calls Baldwin a unique "gay historical figure, because he didn't hide his sexual preference, but he never was someone who would identify as a gay writer or gay activist. He just would say, 'Yeah, I've loved men and women.' It had to be frustrating that he was shut out of the civil rights movement because he was gay and to the leaders of the movement at the time that wasn't OK."



In the play, a graduate student comes to France to interview expatriate Baldwin. In the course of that interview, Ijames depicts many of the people in the writer's life, from cabaret diva Josephine Baker and literary mentor Richard Wright to Baldwin's parents, lovers, teachers. At another point, he channels him as a 13-year-old preacher, which he describes as "the most exhausting section for me to perform."

It could have been even more taxing, he said. "Actually some famous people didn't make the cut. I could have put Martin Luther King or Miles Davis, they all had history with Baldwin."

Ijames started writing The Threshing Floor five years ago and workshopped a short version at Gloucester Stage Company in Massachusetts. Last year he talked with Mauckingbird artistic director and co-founder Peter Reynolds, who read the final version and decided to pair it with Tru in the young company's fifth production. Founded in 2008 to offer classics with a gay perspective, Mauckingbird, Reynolds said, is also about presenting "universal stories that talk to everyone."

In the recent past, Ijames, a North Carolina native, has emerged as one of Philadelphia's most versatile actors, landing roles in regional productions ranging from Angels in America to James and the Giant Peach to Grey Gardens. After the Baldwin show, he starts rehearsing Benvolio for Romeo and Juliet at the Arden. "I'm always the best friend," he said. "But now I think they are the most fun."

His versatility currently is being tapped as he pops in and out of characters and voices with the help of Matthew Lorenz's transporting sound design. The actor says he studied Baldwin's "mannerisms and cadence of speech, what he does with his face, and appropriated those things superficially . . . I'm not an impersonator - this is my Baldwin."

Theater

The Threshing Floor & Tru

Presented in repertory by Mauckingbird Theatre Company through Jan. 31

at the Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St. Tickets: $15-$20.             215-923-8909       or www.mauckingbirdtheatreco.org.