

THEATER

Jan. 13 - 20

THEATER REVIEW RATINGS

★★★★ EXTRAORDINARY / ★★★ GOOD / ★★ FAIR / ★ POOR

REVIEW

★★★★

WHAT: "Sammy and Me"
WHEN: Through Feb. 12
WHERE: MusicalFare Theatre,
Daemen College, 4380 Main
St., Amherst
TICKETS: \$28 to \$32
INFO: 839-8540,
www.musicalfare.com

Cast of one

Eric Jordan Young stretches his talent in 'Sammy and Me'

BY JANA EISENBERG
News Contributing Reviewer

Eric Jordan Young is a one-man force of nature, using every inch of his lithe body, his dance training and innate artistry to bring the audience into his world. We go willingly.

Throughout "Sammy and Me," which opened Wednesday at MusicalFare Theatre, Young plays himself, Sammy Davis Jr. and approximately 20 other characters. The story shows an imagined conversation between Young and his idol, as well as delving into issues that affect both him and the icon.

Early on, "Eric" readies to debut a solo show about Sammy Davis Jr. Young sets the stage for the cast of characters about to cascade from his fertile and intelligent imagination. It's played as a show-within-a-show; "Eric" reads a newspaper item about . . . his own show. The story questions his decision to feature Davis.

Soon enough, the ghost of "Sammy" himself appears, not to mention "Eric" as a child, enthralled with Sammy on TV.



Eric Jordan Young is a one-man force of nature.

Young "Eric" is ensnared in a mostly white world of Webelos and being "the only one" (African-American person, that is).

Even as you are awed by Young's physical feats, you wonder how he does it. With a gesture, a posture or facial adjustment — some subtle, some not — Young shows us everyone from his own mother and grandfather to "Little Sammy."

Young is completely at home in his own skin — and possesses the ease to make us believe we are seeing others' skins as well. The multipersonality trip is straightforwardly delivered, and with Wendy Dann's writing collaboration and directing talent, has beauty and cleverness.

By the time "Eric" sings "There's a Boat That's Leaving Soon for New York," he has taken us through his childhood, and is leaving home for the big time. Meanwhile, "Sammy" has outgrown his uncle and dad's trio and is headlining his own shows.

The end of the first act finds "Eric" auditioning; his innocence is shattered when he is told he isn't "really black." At the same time, his eyes are opened to some of the "kidding" that the Rat Pack heaped upon Davis.

Responsibility is a pervasive issue. "Eric's" grandfather counsels that being "the only one" is a great responsibility — an opportunity to represent your race. "Sammy" counters that he is not responsible for the whole race; he surmounted Jim Crow and

blatant racism to enjoy crossover adulation.

The second act opens on the iconic image of Sammy's fedora slung over a microphone, on the set of "Eric's" show. Young sings "At the Crossroads"; again, the song seems to have been custom-written.

Nearing the end of the show, "Eric" repeatedly demands of his hero/himself: "Did you wish you were white?" The exposition that emerges points up shades of gray in issues that seemed, well, just black and white before.

Finding rejuvenation, Young closes "his" show with "I've Got a Be Me," and then "Mr. Bojangles," which seems to bring us full circle. Young purely puts forth the lyric's classic narrative, with its nostalgia for simpler times, sense of loss and ongoing reverence and hope.

Uncredited in the list of musical numbers, but completely necessary to the show, was Young's last segment: He joyfully offers a medley of the Davis signatures "Candyman" and "Birth of the Blues."

A swinging five-piece band under the direction of Michael G. Hake also carries the night. ●