

Eric Jordan Young shines in Hangar's 'Sammy & Me'

by David Cameron
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Eric Jordan Young has pulled off something wonderful and rare: singing and dancing his way through 30 characters and 18 songs, he's created a one-man show that examines the life of a legendary talent, and not once does it feel like he is showing off.

Indeed, Young's "Sammy & Me," which opened at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca last Friday, transforms what could have been a simple cabaret review into a production with genuine theatrical impact and one very captivating performance.

The "Sammy" of the title is, of course, Sammy Davis, Jr., one of the greatest entertainers of his day—and that's Entertainer in the best sense of the word. Beyond a "triple threat" — actor, singer, dancer — he was also a musician, a gifted impressionist and comic. Most of Davis' life was spent entertaining audiences, and by time of his death in 1990, his influence on generations of performers was easy to see.

"Sammy & Me" is both an exploration and explanation of just what it means to be so deeply influenced by Davis. It begins with Young rehearsing a nightclub act filled with Davis' signature songs, when he pauses to read a news brief about his show. It's not a strong endorsement.

"Why," he reads aloud, "would anyone want to reawaken the life and music of Sammy Davis, Jr. in 2006?" Young realizes that the answer isn't as simple as it should be, and that many people have perceived a negative side to Davis that might be best forgotten.

The entertainer often reluctantly found himself in the middle of racial controversy, caught between success with mainstream white audiences and the limitations that same audience sought to enforce on him as a black man. Young, who is also black, balances Davis' experiences with his own encounters with racial stereotypes, such as the casting director who told



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Eric Jordan Young stars in "Sammy & Me," now at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca.

him he "isn't really black."

Here, the show evolves into a more imaginative theatrical style, as Young takes on multiple characters from both his own life and Davis' life, starting with the "ghost" of Davis, who appears to take him on a journey through the past.

You can't truly appreciate Davis' until you have a full picture, but luckily "Sammy & Me" is not just a varnished celebra-

tion of a great entertainer. Indeed, "Sammy & Me" is a multifaceted examination of Davis, his relationship to his songs, and historical context for understanding Davis' strengths and limitations. As Davis says in the show, "You choose these songs, you choose everything that goes along with them."

And the songs Young chooses run the breadth of Davis' career, including "Yes I Can," "I

Want to Be With You" and "Candyman." While many of the songs are sung just as they are, the best moments come when the song brings another layer to the scene, or gives Young an opportunity to prove how well he can dance. This is especially true when Young sings "Hey There." Thanks to Gerry McIntyre's inventive choreography, Young manages to dance both sides of a duet as both his own childhood self and Davis without missing a beat.

Switching from character to character seems to be the biggest challenge Young faces in this show, and while he's not always as quick or precise as he could be, the characters become clear soon enough. Simple costumes from designer Toni-Leslie James double nicely as props, and allow your imagination fill in the rest.

By the time Young comes to signature Davis tunes "I Gotta Be Me" and "Mr. Bojangles," the audience has a new understanding of the man behind those songs, and the lyrics have greater impact. What Young's baritone may lack in range, he makes up for in energy. Young is both gentle with these songs when needed, and smart enough to let the songs speak for themselves.

Young is helped by his talented collaborator, director, Wendy Dann. Former classmates at Ithaca College, Young and Dann have been working on "Sammy & Me" for more than a year. The show's first run was at the MusicalFare Theatre Company in Buffalo earlier this year.

As she proved with her direction of last year's one-man show "I Am My Own Wife" at the

Hangar, Dann excels at fine-tuning a solo performance. She knows when to rely on the performer, and when to add touches, whether it's a backdrop from set designer Chris Schenk, some extra blue hues from lighting designer Chris Lee, or subtle cues from sound designer Joanna Lynne Staub. A little bit goes a long way, especially in a theater as intimate as the Hangar.

Additionally, a small five-piece band led by pianist/conductor Brian Hertz, plays perfectly suited arrangements by Tommy James. Though there are moments when the musicians threaten to overpower the singer, their presence onstage adds a level of intimacy to the show that makes it more complete.

The show is a labor of love for Eric Jordan Young and director Wendy Dann, and the time and effort put into researching this show have elevated "Sammy & Me" to something more than simple storytelling. The performance feels cathartic, for both the audience and for Young, and by the end of the night, feels genuinely triumphant.

"Sammy & Me" runs through June 17 at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca. Tickets are available at the Ticket Center at the Clinton House or by calling (607) 273-4497, or at the box office one hour prior to curtain. More information is online at www.hangartheatre.org.

David Cameron lives and writes in the one part of Ithaca where it is sunny all year round.