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What Made Sammy Run

Hangar's *Sammy & Me* channels Sammy Davis Jr.'s life through performer Eric Jordan Young

By James MacKillop

Modern musicals based on the lives of actual performers generally buff up the facts, whether it's about George M. Cohan, Patsy Cline, Buddy Holly or the Four Seasons. Put against that model you might label *Sammy & Me*, the season opener at Ithaca's Hangar Theatre, a post-modern musical. In it we remember that Sammy Davis Jr. was a highly ambiguous figure: an enormous talent at 5-foot-4 but also a notorious suck-up and sellout.

His memory is a daunting challenge to co-writer and performer Eric Jordan Young, a youthful black actor in a mostly white theater world. To get at all this ambiguity, Young plays 32 different characters, male and female, black and white, and different versions of himself, first as a child watching Davis worshipfully on television and then his adult self confronting Davis, who died in 1990.

The subtitle of *Sammy & Me* is "a one-man musical," as Young sings and dances through all or parts of 19 different numbers, including the expected titles "Candy Man," "Yes, I Can" and "Mr. Bojangles." The placement of the songs within the narrative Young has created with co-author and director Wendy Dann gives them new meaning they would not have by themselves. In the first act Young does not really cut loose until

"There's a Boat Dat's Leaving Soon for New York," which Davis sang as Sportin' Life in the 1959 movie version of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Not only is it a great, little-heard number, but it pulls together diverse narrative strands.

"I've Gotta Be Me" serves a comparable function in the second act. Young may be as thin and lithe as Davis, but mimicry is not the game here. With Young's taller frame and larger shaved head, his evocation of phrasing and squinting eye are enough. Young is in motion for the entire two hours, and some theatergoers might think he's a better dancer than anything Davis ever showed on film.

The zigzag narrative behind *Sammy & Me* is about Young putting on the show we are seeing. An offstage voice (also Young) barks directions at "Eric," and he delivers two pre-rock 'n' roll standards much associated with Davis: "The Lady is a Tramp" and "Where or When." Indeed, for the first few moments, it looks

as though *Sammy & Me* might be a conventional tribute to a legendary performer.

Yet Young is regularly undercut by a sassy Caribbean wardrobe mistress named Dahlia, who's impatient with displays of vanity by

"Eric" or any of the characters Young is playing. She hands him a newspaper containing a slam against what the show we are seeing is trying to do. Davis' music is called "uninspired songs from the Jim Crow era"



That old black magic: Eric Jordan Young in Hangar's *Sammy & Me*.

that went into a "long-forgotten nightclub act." And soon "Eric" is in dialogue with the ghost of Sammy himself.

Sammy & Me is fairly sketchy about Davis' life. He was half Puerto Rican, suffered discrimination in the Army, lost his eye on a protruding dashboard knob during an auto accident and rose to real fame as the only black member of Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack, where he gamely answered to the call of "Smokey." There's nothing about his big Broadway role *Golden Boy* (1964). The Swedish actress Mai Britt, whose marriage to Davis caused such a ruckus in 1960, is passed off as one of his white bedroom conquests, after Kim Novak.

What troubles Young's perception of Davis the most is that the one-time dancing vaudevillian was really a lineal descendant of Stepin Fetchit, the dimwitted comic black man of early sound movies. Davis wanted to thrive in the white world, and white people liked him because he didn't threaten them.

Meanwhile, we have noticed that Young, moving from one voice to another as mercurially as the early Robin Williams on a tear, can himself easily sound white. Not a comic white man, like the late Richard Pryor, but a generic, educated, middle-class white guy. This is because Young grew up in a white neighborhood where he was the only black kid in the Cub Scouts, where his mother was the only black woman in her office and his father the only black man at his work. We also know he's an Ithaca College graduate, in the same class as his redheaded director and co-author, Wendy Dann. So we know why Young is shattered when he's told at an audition that he's not really black.

The voice of a departed grandfather counsels him that being the first or the only is a responsibility, an opportunity to represent his race. To this the voice of Davis answered that he surmounted Jim Crow to win cross-over adulation. And in heavy irony, an actual quote from life: "Being a star has helped me to get insulted in places where the average Negro could never hope to get insulted." Such a guy could never speak as Kanye West or 50 Cent.

Thus, at the climax of the second act, two of Davis' signature numbers, "I've Gotta Be Me" and "Mr. Bojangles" take on new resonance. Instead of Las Vegas nightclub fodder, they turn into existential statements.

Director Dann, who's established a flair for one-person shows with *Chesapeake* (performed at Ithaca's Kitchen Theatre Company and Syracuse Stage) and *I Am My Own Wife* (at the Hangar), guides Young in filling the bare stage. The trick for the actor in creating a new character without props or makeup is a sharp shift of the shoulders and neck and a new body-set. What Dann and Young do together, along with lighting designer Chris Lee, is to continually create new spaces out of light, air and a wave of the arm. Gerry McIntyre's choreography integrates the action so seamlessly that we cannot see where it begins and ends. Brian Hertz's five-player ensemble is as vibrant as any Sammy Davis had in life.

Ithaca's Hangar Theatre is the only regional company committed to professional productions of new works each season. The homegrown effort *Sammy & Me* can dance with the stars. □

This production runs through June 17. See Times Table for information.