

Master Showman

BROADWAY ACTOR ERIC JORDAN YOUNG SHINES IN THE ONE-MAN HANGAR SHOW 'SAMMY & ME'

by Barbara Adams

"SAMMY & ME," BY ERIC JORDAN YOUNG AND WENDY DANN. DIRECTED BY WENDY DANN, FEATURING ERIC JORDAN YOUNG. AT THE HANGAR THEATRE, THROUGH JUNE 17

A one-man musical may strike you like a one-man band — you admire the effort and energy even if the enterprise seems lonely. But *Sammy & Me*, a world premiere currently opening the Hangar Theatre's 32nd season, will overturn your preconceptions. Opening night, I overheard a couple murmuring, "He's fabulous" — "and it's fascinating how the work is put together."

That sums it up — splendid performer, engaging play. Eric Jordan Young, whose performance will leave you hoping for a sequel, is an outsized talent. Like his inspiration, Sammy Davis Jr., he can sing, dance, act and entertain with panache. And just as Sammy wrestled with finding his own voice (in one scene Sinatra tells him to quit copying him), so Young seeks to define his style apart from that of his role model.

Or at least that's the premise of the show — Young clearly has his own style, his own glorious voice, and a fresh take on all those beloved songs, from "Where or When" to "The Birth of the Blues."

Young co-wrote the show with longtime friend Wendy Dann, who also handsomely directs this production. Both graduated from Ithaca College's theatre program in 1993. Dann turned to directing and teaching; she is currently the Hangar's associate artistic director. Young's career as a performer includes the Broadway productions of *Chicago*, *Ragtime*, *Dessa Rose* and *Seussical: The Musical*.

Deciding to develop his New York cabaret act about Davis into a full-length work, Young asked Dann to direct. Her one-person shows include last summer's *I Am My Own Wife* (Hangar) and *Chesapeake* (Kitchen Theatre and Syracuse Stage). Their collaboration, begun April 2005, turned into co-authoring, as Young improvised on his memories.

The resulting play premiered earlier this year to raves in Buffalo and is a co-production with MusicalFare Theatre Company there. The piece has been reworked for the Hangar's larger three-quarter space. Joanna Lynne Staub does sound design, Tommy James music supervision, Gerry McIntyre choreography. Chris Schenk's simple stage design is framed by four huge lighting booms, and throughout, Chris

Lee's brilliant, expressive lighting defines rapid shifts in time, place and character.

The opening's intentionally a bit low-key, as Young stays upstage with the five musicians (led by Brian Hertz on piano). The plot device: He's rehearsing for this very production as the musicians try to conceal a negative pre-show review. Snatching the newspaper from them, Young learns that the reporter questions why anyone in 2006 would want to revisit the unenlightened music and attitudes of a black performer in the Jim Crow era.

Daunted, Young questions his own intentions, and through force of desire, summons the ghost of Sammy. The rest of the play interleaves his conversations with Sammy, moments from Sammy's life, scenes from Young's own childhood, and the present reality of an opening night ticking down to first curtain with its lead performer full of self-doubt.

This is finally Young's story, not Davis', the tale of a young black boy growing up in an all-white Upstate suburb who gets discouraged being "the only one."

Young plays himself as a wide-eyed kid, riveted to the TV watching Sammy, "the world's greatest entertainer," perform. He plays his patient mother; the kids who taunt him; his loving, skeptical granddad, who advises him to "be careful whose shoes you're stepping into."

Young morphs into some 30 characters, including tiny Sammy hoofing in vaudeville, along with his father and uncle. He's Harry Belafonte, come to rouse a hiding Sammy from bed to respond to the shootings in

Selma. He's several casting directors, one telling Eric he's not "ethnic" enough to do commercials. He's Flip Wilson, and he's Dahlia, the fussing Puerto Rican stagehand trying to get her "Rico" ready for the night's performance.

Admittedly, I mistook Dahlia as flamboyantly gay (it plays just as well), but the other characters Young embodies are clear, and he shifts between them at lightning speed — even when they're different ages, holding hands, dancing together. Young's physicality is astonishing, and the actor in him takes his characters well beyond Sammy's famous miming skill.

Sammy & Me evokes a century of black performing history and troubling racism — recreating the magic even as it offers a clear-eyed critique. When you hear Eric Jordan Young singing farewell to Sammy in "Bye Bye Blackbird" or see him conjuring Mr. Bojangles, you're simultaneously in multiple states of spirit. That old black magic indeed. ■



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(Photo by Thomas Hoebbel Photography)