

Rhythm, love, voice, truth: Hip hop in 'The Realness'

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff writer

When I arrived for a performance of "The Realness: a break beat play" – the latest production at Merrimack Repertory Theatre and a world premiere of the latest work from renowned playwright and hip-hop artist Idris Goodwin – I perused the other audience members. This matinee was for press and subscribers, many of the latter being in the 65-plus age group. I wondered how they would receive this play – with its truly epic tower of speakers and boom boxes dominating the stage, with classic hip-hop playing in the background – dropping angry, frustrated lyrics peppered with curse words – as they took their seats. I wondered if anyone would be able to watch and enjoy a story so far removed from their personal experience. I needn't have worried.

THEATER REVIEW

Every silver-haired person I questioned after the show absolutely, enthusiastically loved it – as did this slightly younger reporter who was glad to be transported back to 1996 and a time of glaring-white sneakers, where the story takes place.

"The Realness: a break beat play" gives us the story of T.O. (played by Terrell Donnell Sledge), a college student. "A nerd from the 'burbs," he moves to the big city for school and eschews his given name Tom, but discovers, quite humorously, that his initials, when said by his new city Puerto Rican friends, sounds like the Spanish word for "uncle." So he ends up being "uncle Tom" despite his best efforts. T.O. is thrilled to be in "not a melting pot; more like an urban buffet," and looks forward to experiencing the diversity of the hip-hop lifestyle and culture he's only obsessed

IF YOU GO

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE PRESENTS 'THE REALNESS: A BREAK BEAT PLAY'

WHEN: Through April 10; see website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

TICKETS: \$23-\$60. Senior, student, military, Lowell resident and group discounts available.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org or www.mrt.org/show/realness.

over from the far-afeld safety of his trust-fund upbringing.

Actor Sledge is the right combination of sweet nerd, urgent suitor and emerging hip-hop journalist. T.O.'s asides to the

audience (well-delineated with a lighting effect) are hilarious – and informative for those not from that world. They cut the live-action tension and are just so funny most of the time (there are, of course, serious moments shared with us, too). Witness the case of when T.O. is describing, via aside, his kiss with beautiful rap artist Prima – literally while it is happening.

In his exploration of the vibrant, exciting world of mid-'90s hip hop, he meets some incredible people – Prima (the lovely and talented Diomargy Nunez, a killer rapper), her manager and tough-guy aspiring rapper himself, Lord Style (Segun Akande), and Prima's neighborhood friend Roy (Jessie Prez), a gentle stutterer in his daily life who spits out rhymes with fluid ease. Prez plays multiple characters, and is simply amazing in a rapid-fire display of "rap archetypes," narrated nearby by T.O. Prez and



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

Terrell Donnell Sledge and Diomargy Nunez star in "The Realness: a break beat play," at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., through April 10.

Akande's characters have a showdown rap battle at a Scribble Jam-inspired event that's also incredible to witness. Joy Hooper portrays T.O.'s college

professor, pushing him to go deeper and learn more about hip hop and himself; she also embodies several

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John Wayne's hat, Disney's Mickey Mouse ears up for auction

By DAVID SHARP

The Associated Press

BIDDEFORD, Maine – A collection of memorabilia including Babe Ruth's baseball glove and Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse ears is coming up for auction off the beaten path in Maine, far from the Big Apple where Ruth smacked home runs and the theme park and studio Disney created in California.

The items that once belonged to the late New York TV and radio personality Joe Franklin include several dozen hats from a bygone era such as Frank Sinatra's fedora and John Wayne's Stetson.

The auction will take place April 2 at Maine-based Saco River Auction, a small auction house far from the entertainment hubs of New York and Los Angeles.

Auctioneer Troy Thibodeau said the items came from a collector who wishes to remain anonymous who spent years purchasing items from the collection of Frank-

lin, a talk show host who encouraged his famous guests to leave a souvenir after appearing on his show.

The items include leather jackets belonging to Steve McQueen and Marlon Brando, Laurel and Hardy's boxing gloves, a baseball glove used by Joe DiMaggio and a harmonica used by Janis Joplin. In addition to John Wayne's Stetson, the collection includes the actor's cowboy boots and spurs.

Franklin's era included the heyday of hats. The collection includes pillbox hats that belonged to Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn, Charlie Chaplin's derby, Babe Ruth's Gatsby, a leather hat belonging to Jimi Hendrix, a tattered straw hat worn by Buddy Ebsen and a sombrero owned by Slim Pickens.

Others who donated hats included Grace Kelly, Judy Garland, Walter Matthau, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Ray Charles, Mae West, John-Carson, Burt Lancaster

and Vincent Price.

Franklin, who died in January 2015 at age 88, was a talk show institution in New York. He amassed so much memorabilia – either as gifts or through his own purchases – that his office was a cluttered mess. He even rented expensive storage units to handle the overflow, said Steve Garrin, longtime producer and friend.

“His office was floor to ceiling with stuff,” said Garrin.

Though Franklin never had the national exposure of talk show hosts who followed, he was an icon in New York where he hosted radio and TV shows for decades. Garrin and Franklin joined a restaurateur to open “Joe Franklin's Memory Lane Restaurant” in Manhattan's theater district.

Franklin, who logged more than 300,000 guests during his career, auctioned off some of the items himself in 2002. Some of those items including Jack Benny's stage violin are back up for sale again as part of



File photo by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

This Aug. 6, 1993, file photo shows TV personality Joe Franklin in New York. Franklin died in January 2015. A collection of celebrity memorabilia once owned by Franklin is coming up for auction in Saco, Maine. It includes a baseball glove belonging to Babe Ruth, Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse ears and Steve McQueen's leather jacket.

the collection in Saco, Thibodeau said.

The small auction house made a name for itself in recent years with some

high-profile items, including the oldest known recording of black vocal group and a rare baseball card from 1865.

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Realness

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other characters with style and variety.

At its core, “The Realness” is a love story – the love of T.O. for Prima, as viewed through a time period's love of emerging hip hop culture. This music helped a population deal with the struggles of everyday life, and the heartbreaks and violence therein. It helped people express anger and despair, when rap icons like Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. paid the ultimate price for their craft. And as T.O. falls for Prima, we are swept up in that

sweetness of young love, into that universal story to which we can all relate. When T.O. swooningly talks of her, we are privy to “Prima's Theme” running through his head.

The play runs approximately 90 minutes, with no intermission. For the 4 p.m. Saturday performance this weekend, licensed professionals from Acre Family Childcare will provide free child care and activities for kids up to age 10. Other special events are on the MRT website.

For tickets and more information, visit www.mrt.org/show/realness.

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