

2015

Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation

Christopher Atkinson

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Atkinson, Christopher, "Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation" (2015). *LSU Master's Theses*. 3378.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3378

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

AUGMENTED RENAISSANCE:
FROM CREATION TO REVELATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by
Christopher A. Atkinson
B.A., Albany State University, 2012
May 2015

Acknowledgment

I would first like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who is the head of my life. To my Mother and Father: Words can 't begin to express how grateful I am to be your son. You've instilled pivotal attributes in me that shaped and molded me into the man that I am today. I marvel at your unwavering support and I love you from the bottom of my heart and depths of my soul! To Shelby Atkinson: We bump heads constantly, but I appreciate you being such a fantastic little sister. You give me a reason to better myself so that I can continue to be a beacon of light in your life. I love you! To Aunt Lavette and Aunt Odessa: You two ladies introduced me to acting and black drama. You ladies were the artistic standards of perfection for your generation and I only hope to be that for my generation in this crazy family. Thanks for everything and I hope I continue to make you proud.

To Dr. Wendy Coleman: Thank you for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. Through your tough love/intense training I was able to grow and reach unimaginable levels in my acting. I love you Doc and you will forever and always be my number one Dreamgirl! To Demitri Nader: If there were a picture next to the word best friend in the dictionary, it would have your face in it. I never experienced what true brotherhood meant until we crossed paths Fall 2010. Thank you for being a fantastic friend and supporter!

To my LSU Performance Faculty: Thanks for seeing my potential and allowing me to be apart of this ensemble. My training here has not only made me a better actor, but a better man.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Inspiration.....	4
Chapter 3: Concept Development and Research.....	5
3.1 August Wilson & Play Selections	5
3.2 Harlem Renaissance & Literature	9
Chapter 4: Early Writings and Ideas.....	12
4.1 Original Title and Selection of August Wilson Characters.....	12
4.2 Character Responsibilities & Relations.....	12
4.3 Original Jazz Selections	13
4.4 Dance	13
4.5 Voiceovers	14
4.6 Introductory Video	14
Chapter 5: Rehearsal Process	15
5.1 Intellectual Property Predicament	15
5.2 Rehearsal Schedule & Space	16
5.3 M.F.A. Acting Training Application	17
5.4 Character Transitions & Distinctions	21
5.5 Music & Dance Inclusion	22
5.6 Audience & Accompanist Involvement.....	24
5.7 Voiceover & Introductory Video	25
Chapter 6: Finalized Character Development	27
Chapter 7: Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation Final Script.....	31
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	39
8.1 Audience Feedback.....	39
8.2 Future Development	39
8.3 Effects on my Artistry	40
References.....	42
Appendices	43
Appendix A.1: Archival Production Weblink	43
Appendix A.2: Archival Production Photos	43
Vita	44

Abstract

During the summer of 2013, the M.F.A. acting ensemble at Louisiana State University was charged with devising solo performance projects that would be performed December 6-14, 2014. We were given artistic freedom to create shows that could cover different topics and a variety of genres. The writing and performance of this project served as a graduation requirement, but was also pitched as a professional opportunity post graduation. Initially I opposed this project, but I soon became elated once I chose my subject matter. I knew that if I was going to perform a solo piece for 30-40 minutes it had to be based on things that I was genuinely passionate about. I also wanted to devise a show that would grant me the opportunity to share talents that haven't been showcased. Black Drama, especially the works of August Wilson and jazz music came to mind in this moment. Chapter One of this thesis explains my purpose for choosing this subject matter and my vision. Chapter Two discusses August Wilson's artistic impact during my undergraduate acting training. Chapter Three includes historical research that aided in devising my work. Chapter Four details my initial literary, music, dance, and design element ideas. Chapter Five explores my transition and rehearsal process from script development to show performance. Chapter Six is the finalized listing of characters and their physical and vocal distinctions. Chapter Seven is the final script. Chapter Eight concludes this thesis and discusses audience response and areas for future development.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As Master of Fine Arts in Acting degree candidates at Louisiana State University (LSU), were required to submit a written thesis in order to graduate. I decided to focus my thesis on the works of August Wilson and jazz music. I wanted the LSU community and the College of Music and Dramatic Arts to witness a form of theatre/acting that is high in value and impactful. While here at LSU, I've witnessed and participated in shows that explore African-American culture such as *Clybourne Park* and *StickFly*. Both shows confront African-American issues from different perspectives, but at the same rate, allow audience members to get a glance into African-American culture. August Wilson was a pioneer of devising stories of African-American culture and bringing them to the stage. His works showed the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lifestyle. I've marveled at his directness and boldness, and I knew this had to be the subject matter and foundation of my thesis.

Aside from acting, my second passion is music, specifically neo-soul and jazz. I've trained in both genres for years and I wanted to showcase this in my show. I am drawn specifically to jazz legends such as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Louie Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald. Their influence during the Harlem Renaissance not only impacted the music industry, but also caused them to become iconic trailblazers for future artists. Their music touches the soul and as listeners, we become transfixed as they take us on a musical journey that leaves us spellbound and longing for more. A show influenced by August Wilson with the incorporation of Jazz music, in my opinion, was the perfect recipe to an evening of invigorating theatre!

Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation was birthed from this vision, a story that would explore what happens to dreams once they become deferred. I wanted this story to be heavily influenced by music and rhetoric from the Harlem Renaissance. Being a solo performance piece, I wanted to portray five characters that would be inspired by some of August Wilson's most popular works such as: *Fences*, *Jitney*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. These works served as the foundation from which I had the pleasure of creating my own story line. I wanted to tell the story of a young man who lost himself, but through inspiration and the personal testimonies of four other characters, he finds himself again.

The following chapters will discuss my experience of this vision and its manifestation. Chapter Two discusses August Wilson's artistic impact during my undergraduate acting training. I'll first talk about how my interest in August Wilson deepened through classroom studies and conclude by elaborating on my connection to his material based on my portrayal of Cory Maxson from *Fences*. Chapter Three is purposeful historical research that aided in devising my work. I'll first explain my need for this research, follow by providing examples of research that solidified my writing's vision, and conclude with literary pieces of text from August Wilson and Langston Hughes that inspired my storyline. Chapter Four details my initial literary, music, dance, and design element ideas. I'll first discuss my original title and character analysis, follow with original music and dance ideas, and conclude with initial sound and visual design elements. Chapter Five explores my transition and rehearsal process from script development to show performance. This chapter will be a culmination of positive and negative experiences while rehearsing my show. I will discuss how my script was impacted by the intellectual property

predicament, talk about my experience rehearsing in different spaces, elaborate on my acting process based on acquired training thus far, discuss discovered effective character transitions, detail how I incorporated music, dance, my accompanist, and the audience into the show, and conclude with my experience bringing original design elements into fruition. Chapter Six is the finalized listing of characters and their physical and vocal distinctions. I'll analyze each character and differentiate them through the use of Laban movement analysis and vocal acquisition. Chapter Seven is the final script. Chapter Eight concludes this thesis and discusses audience response and areas for future development. I'll begin by discussing some general feedback from audience members and conclude with three areas I would love to further develop.

The works of August Wilson haven't been showcased as of late at LSU, and the black drama productions that have opened at LSU Theatre have unfortunately received bad reviews. Black drama, especially the works of August Wilson, are immensely valuable and through this thesis I aim to showcase that. August Wilson and other pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance created works that were uplifting, influential, and relatable despite the color line of the time. *Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation* echoes the aforementioned goals, but also aims to entertain, inspire, and provoke emotions.

Chapter 2: Inspiration

My interest in August Wilson deepened when I was accepted to Albany State University in 2008. Dr. Wendy Coleman, my acting instructor and director, immersed herself in Black Drama. Attending a Historically Black College and University allotted us the opportunity to explore Black Drama in ways that wouldn't be present at predominately white institutions. We studied Susan Lori-Parks, Keith Antar Mason, Ntozake Shange, Lorraine Hansberry, George C. Wolfe, and of course August Wilson. I connected deeply with the works of August Wilson, especially *Fences*. I related to this story due to my personal relationship with my father. At the time my father didn't support my pursuit to be an actor/singer. Being West African, my dad believed strongly in the views of his African culture, which was to find a job that would insure financial stability. I disagreed with this ideal and wanted to pursue a career that I would be passionate about, rather than one that would grant me the support of my father. I felt that Cory Maxson and myself were two peas in a pod. We were two young men who just wanted to pursue our dreams and be happy, but due to our tense father and son relationships, our dreams were heavily impacted. I was granted the opportunity to portray Cory Maxson Spring 2010, when my school competed at the National Association of Dramatic and Speech arts in Dallas, Texas. I won the All-Star Actor award due to my compelling performance. My connection and love for August Wilson grew tremendously after this. Three and a half years later the accumulation of this passion served me in writing my solo performance piece

Chapter 3: Concept Development and Research

3.1 August Wilson & Play Selections

Before I started writing my thesis, I wanted to get a better understanding of who August Wilson was. I remembered lots of things about him from my undergraduate education, but I was particularly curious about why he chose to base his plays on such bold and controversial subject matter. He was of mixed-race, raised in a single-parent household due to the abandonment of his father, and faced immense racial issues while growing up. He knew at a young age that he wanted to be a writer and after studying the works of Langston Hughes and other notable African-American authors, he decided that he would become a poet. Although he never studied theatre, during the Black Arts Movement, he felt that it was his duty to aid in the over arching desire for African-Americans to find a place in this world. So he founded the Black Horizons Theatre with the aim to raise the consciousness of the “people”. People meaning whites or any other race that in some form or fashion rejected the idea of African- American prosperity in society. He was specifically influenced by what he called the Four B’s. In an interview with the *Paris Review* he stated:

My influences have been what I call my four *Bs*—the primary one being the blues, then Borges, Baraka, and Bearden. From Borges, those wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etcetera. From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don’t write political plays. That’s not what I’m about. From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality. To those four *Bs* I could add two more, Bullins and Baldwin. Ed Bullins is a playwright with a serious body of work, much of it produced in the sixties and seventies. It was with Bullins’s work that I first discovered someone writing plays about blacks with an uncompromising honesty and creating rich and memorable characters. And then James Baldwin, in particular his call for a “profound

articulation of the black tradition,” which he defined as “that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that can sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house.” I thought, Let me answer the call. A profound articulation, but let’s worry about the profundities later. I wanted to put that on stage, to demonstrate that the “manners and rituals” existed and that the tradition was capable of sustaining you. (Lyons and Plimpton)

He used this influence to write what has become known as The Pittsburgh Cycle, a ten play cycle, nine of which are set in Pittsburgh, that focus on the African-American experience and each play is set in a different decade during the 20th Century. He used the theatre as a medium to bring the community together to show the culture and lifestyle of African-Americans. During the same interview with the *Paris Review* he said:

I don’t write particularly to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that’s not why I write. I work as an artist. All art is political in the sense that it serves someone’s politics. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks. I think my plays offer them a different way to look at black Americans. For instance, in *Fences* they see a garbage man, a person they don’t really look at, although they see a garbage man every day. By looking at Troy’s life, white people find out that the content of this black garbage man’s life is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing that these things are as much part of his life as theirs can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives. (Lyons and Plimpton)

August Wilson was a literary mastermind. I marvel at how he was able to use his work to show that different races naturally experience different things, but we all face similar issues. We all live in the same world and its okay to relate to one another from a humanistic point of view so that we can learn how to deal with each other in the most effective way possible. Charles Isherwood, a writer for the *New York Times* stated:

Mr. Wilson depicted the struggles of black Americans with uncommon lyrical richness, theatrical density and emotional heft, in plays that gave vivid voices to people on the frayed margins of life: cabdrivers and maids, garbage men and side men and petty criminals. In bringing to the popular American stage the gritty specifics of the lives of his poor, trouble-plagued and sometimes powerfully embittered black characters, Mr. Wilson also described universal truths about the struggle for dignity, love, security and happiness in the face

of often overwhelming obstacles. In dialogue that married the complexity of jazz to the emotional power of the blues, he also argued eloquently for the importance of black Americans' honoring the pain and passion in their history, not burying it to smooth the road to assimilation. For Mr. Wilson, it was imperative for black Americans to draw upon the moral and spiritual nobility of their ancestors' struggles to inspire their own ongoing fight against the legacies of white racism. (Isherwood)

I pulled four pieces of text from August Wilson's canon that resonated and aligned with the vision for my show. These monologues and scenes will serve as the foundation for which I will create my own storyline interweaving similar ideas, characteristics, and rhetoric.

3.1.1 Cory's Monologue From Fences

I live here too! I ain't scared of you. I was walking by you to go into the house cause you sitting on the steps drunk, singing to yourself. I ain't got to say excuse me to you. You don't count around here any more. Now why don't you just get out my way. You talking about what you did for me... what'd you ever give me? You ain't never gave me nothing. You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. Every time I heard your footsteps in the house. Wondering all the time... what's Papa gonna say if I do this?... What's he gonna say if I do that?... What's he gonna say if I turn on the radio? And Mama, too... she tries... but she's scared of you. I don't know how she stand you... after what you did to her. What you gonna do... give me a whupping? You can't whup me no more. You're too old. You're just an old man. You crazy. You know that? You just a crazy old man... talking about I got the devil in me. Come on... put me out. I ain't scare of you. Come on! Come on, put me out. What's the matter? You so bad... put me out! Come on! Come on! (Jacobus 1584-1585)

3.1.2 Troy and Cory's Duo Scene From Fences

TROY: Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? Wanna stand up in my face and ask a damn fool-ass question like that. Talking about liking somebody. Come here, boy, when I talk to you. (CORY comes over to where TROY is working. He stands slouched over and TROY shoves him on his shoulder.) Straighten up, goddamn it! I asked you a question. What law is there say I got to like you?

CORY: None.

TROY: Well, alright then! Don't you eat every day? (Pause.) Answer me when I talk to you! Don't you eat every day?

CORY: Yeah.

TROY: Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!

CORY: Yes . . . sir.

TROY: You eat every day?

CORY: Yessir!

TROY: Got a roof over your head.

CORY: Yessir!

TROY: Got clothes on your back.

CORY: Yessir.

TROY: Why you think that is?

CORY: Cause of you.

TROY: Aw, hell I know it's cause of me . . . but why do you thing that is?

CORY: (Hesitant.) Cause you like me.

TROY: Like you? I go out of here every morning . . . bust my butt . . . putting up with them crackers every day . . . cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw. (Pause.) It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food. . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here . . . before it go along any further . . . I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy? (Jacobus 1572)

3.1.3 Becker's Monologue from Jitney

Stay away from me! What I get, huh? What I get? Tell me? (BOOSTER is silent.) I get a murderer, that's what. A murderer. And the way your mama loved you. You killed her! You know that? You a double murderer! That woman took sick the day that judge sentenced you and she ain't never walked or said another word or ate another thing for

twenty three days. She just laid up in that room until she died. Now you tell me that ain't killing her. Tell me that ain't killing her! I was there! I was holding her hand when she died. Where was you? Locked up in a cage like some animal. That's what killed her. To hear the judge say that the life she brought in the world was unfit to live. That you be "remanded to the custody of the Commissioner of Corrections at Western State Penitentiary and there to be executed in the electric chair. This order to be carried out thirty days from today." Ain't that what the judge said? Ain't that what she heard? "This order to be carried out thirty days from today." That's what killed her. She didn't want to live them thirty days. She didn't want to be alive to hear on the eleven o'clock news that they had killed you. So don't you say nothing to me about turning my back when I nursed that woman, talked to her, held her hand, prayed over her and the last words to come out of her mouth was your name. I was there! Where were you Mr. Murderer? Mr. Unfit To Live Amongst Society. Where were you when your mama was dying and calling your name? (Stops talking a moment to gather himself.) You are my son. I helped to bring you into this world. But from this moment on...I'm calling the deal off. You ain't nothing to me, boy. You just another nigger on the street. (Wilson 59-60)

3.1.4 Levee and Toledo's Duo Scene From Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

LEVEE: What you talking about? I can spell music. (leaps up, pulls out a roll of bills and peels off a single dollar bill) I got a dollar say I can spell it! Put your dollar up. Where your dollar? (LEVEE slaps the dollar bill on the floor D.L. of TOLEDO.) Now, come on. Put your dollar up. Talking about I can't spell music.

TOLEDO: Alright, I'm gonna show you. (slowly rises, pulls a dollar bill from his pocket and places it on top of LEVEE's bill) Cutler. Slow Drag. You hear this? The nigger betting me a dollar he can spell music. I don't want no shit now! (TOLEDO sits. Confidently:) Alright. Go ahead. Spell it.

LEVEE: It's a bet then. Talking about I can't spell music.

TOLEDO. Go ahead then. Spell it. Music. Spell it.

LEVEE: I can spell it, nigger! M-U-S-I-K. There (Wilson 13)

3.2 Harlem Renaissance & Literature

The Harlem Renaissance was a period during the 20th Century that impacted American History in the areas of art, literature, and music. During the 1920s writers, authors, musicians, and artist gathered together in Harlem, New York to embrace African-

American culture in efforts to establish a more assured conception of identity and pride.

Alain Locke coined this concept the “New Negro”. He stated:

This evaluation of identity required an honest representation of the African-American experience. The adoption of serious portrayals of black American life in art, as opposed to the caricatures provided through minstrelsy and vaudeville, was a necessary step in the cultivation of the Harlem Renaissance ideals. The black artist's objective was to "repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective. (Oppenheim)

The Harlem Renaissance caused an explosion of artistic and literary praise. African American culture was taken seriously and appreciated. Several African-American artists, authors, and musicians such as: Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Dizzie Gillespie, and Ella Fitzgerald. The Apollo Theatre and The Cotton Club also came into fruition.

Cotton clubs and juke joints have intrigued me since I was a child. I remember watching Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor in *Harlem Nights*. The atmosphere, costumes, music, and décor were things that sparked my interest and have stayed with me until this day. In *Harlem Nights* the Cotton Club was owned and operated by African-Americans. It gave a real life depiction of what would've been viewed if you stepped through the doors of a 1920s Cotton Club. Although the movie depicted realistic settings, it didn't depict the realistic racial factors that would've been seen. The first Cotton Club hit the scene during the 1920s in Harlem. It was a whites-only establishment that featured entertainment from popular African-American entertainers during the time. I was also drawn to Juke Joints that were the southern imitations of cotton clubs. Unlike cotton clubs, juke joints catered to African-Americans. They weren't as elaborate as the cotton clubs, but they allowed African-

Americans to gather together and enjoy good music and good times. I want the setting of my show to take place in a southern juke joint.

Langston Hughes' s epic poem *Harlem: A Dream Deferred* was the inspiration behind my storyline. In this poem he explores what happens to dreams once they're no longer being pursued. Do they haunt us, stifle us, or possibly encourage us? This poem personally resonates with me because I've always had vivid dreams, but found myself neglecting them due to personal insecurities.

3.2.1 Harlem: A Dream Deferred by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?
(Hughes 44)

Chapter 4: Early Writings and Ideas

4.1 Original Title and Selection of August Wilson Characters

When I first approached my thesis, I knew that I wanted to implement distinct characters from the works of August Wilson. My original idea was to pull characters directly from his works and allow them to keep their original name, lines, and characteristics. I wanted my show to pay homage to August Wilson and for the characters to be recognizable to the audience if they were familiar with his works. A unique title came to mind... *Wilson in August*. I didn't know what the title could possibly represent, but I loved how it sounded. August not only was the first name of the playwright to whom my show would pay tribute, but it's also a transitional season of the month. Transitions in life could easily be a topic explored in my show.

While searching for characters that intrigued me, I noticed that I was particularly drawn to characters that had hopes and desires, but due to unforeseen circumstances they became intangible. After weeks of extensive readings I pulled Cory, Rose, and Troy from *Fences*, Berniece from *The Piano Lesson*, Levee from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Becker from *Jitney*, and Rena from *Jitney*.

4.2 Character Responsibilities & Relations

Once I pulled my seven characters, I knew that I wanted to place them in a roaring and sultry juke joint that particularly thrived during the Harlem Renaissance. Each character would have an individual responsibility to serving the juke joint. Initial job responsibilities included: Becker as the owner, Ruth as the neglected wife of Booker, Levee as the wannabe entertainer, Troy as the dissatisfied cook, Berniece as the financial secretary, Rena as the flirtatious waitress, and Cory as the frequent lonesome attendee. I

wanted the storyline to focus on Cory and his desire to break out of years of self-bondage. The juke joint and its lively atmosphere would thus serve as an outlet and a constant reminder of the life he desires. One at a time, the six other characters would be drawn to Cory and through personal stories and songs encourage him to take the necessary steps needed to obtain his desire.

4.3 Original Jazz Selections

My original ideas regarding music were to not only play famous jazz songs from the 1920s-1940s, but also to sing them with live accompaniment. I wanted each character in my show to sing a song or at least a section of a song that would correspond with their testimonial monologue. I was particularly drawn to Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Louie Armstrong, and Miles Davis. I compiled a list of potential songs such as: “Sophisticated Lady”, “God Blessed a Child”, “Summertime”, “Basin Street Blues”, “Caravan”, “Fever”, “In a Sentimental Mood”, “How High the Moon”, “What a Wonderful World”, “Feeling Good”, “One For My Baby”, and “My Funny Valentine.” I wanted the majority of the songs to be mid-tempo songs or ballads. I wanted to save all the up-tempo songs for characters that were very lively and expressive in movement and voice like Levee and Rena. I also wanted to explore the idea of Cory wanting to sing, but not singing until the end of the show, which would result from him finding resolution with his father Troy.

4.4 Dance

I had to incorporate dance into the show. I was particularly drawn to the Lindy Hop Jazz Style and Swing. Both dance styles are fun, high in energy, and aren’t technically demanding. I am a confident mover, but not a trained dancer. I wanted to explore possibly

opening the show with a big dance number and possibly using projections that could be cast on two wall surfaces. I would be the main dancer, but it would appear on the wall surface as if I had two background dancers accompanying me. Another idea that I wanted to explore would be distinctive character movement in the space.

4.5 Voiceovers

Another original idea was to explore character work through voiceovers. Cory would be the only character that would be seen on stage while the six other characters would vocally appear throughout the performance. I wanted to do all the voiceovers and not use filters or effects to aid me. I know that I will have to find creative, but purposeful ways to incorporate the voiceovers. During my rehearsal process I will explore how to not only achieve this, but how to also play with connecting certain characters to specific areas on stage.

4.6 Introductory Video

I wanted to introduce the juke joint to the audience through a short movie clip. The show would start off as if the audience has arrived at the cotton club and is being taken on a tour. They would be able to get a feel of the ambiance, see the characters in action, and hear some great music. I knew this would be a very time demanding project. I had to find a space, get actors, musicians, décor, and costumes. The idea was far fetched, but I wanted to see if was possible. If not, I wanted to see if I could find a movie clip that had the same feel to the juke joint that I wanted to have represented in my piece

Chapter 5: Rehearsal Process

5.1 Intellectual Property Predicament

While rehearsing Swine Palace's production of *Frankenstein*, the ensemble ran into a slight problem concerning the use of intellectual property. This was a term that was familiar to me, but I didn't think I would face regarding my thesis. I explained my show's intention and focus to the Head of our M.F.A. Program from the very beginning and was given the go ahead to proceed with my script development. So I found it very jarring when I was informed that I had to change a lot of original script ideas. These ideas came directly from the works of August Wilson. If I kept the ideas in my script I would have to pay royalties to the Wilson estate due to the text not being available in public domain and financially profiting from the show. However, it was never my intention to benefit financially from this show or any future shows. So much time and effort had been invested, but I knew that my project could still be successful and inspirational despite the changes. I just had to change a few things in order to protect the artistic integrity of this program and myself.

Some things that were affected included my original title, character names, and direct dialogues from inspired works. The original title of my show was *Wilson in August*. Although this title wasn't copyrighted, I felt that it would be best if August Wilson's name stayed out of the title. The show could easily be dedicated to him without having his name creatively placed in the title. So I changed my title to *Augmented Renaissance "From Creation to Revelation."* I was particularly drawn to the word "augment" due to its musical association and I was drawn to Renaissance not only because my play was inspired by events and music during the Harlem Renaissance, but because it was also synonymous with

words like rebirth and revive. The subtitle from creation to revelation represented the experience of feeling like there is only one thing you're meant to do and the journey you take to make it a tangible reality. I originally used direct character names from selected works, but due to the intellectual property ordeal I changed all my character names. The old to new character names are listed below:

- A. Cory Maxson became Clifton "Cliff" Nathaniel Lewis
- B. Berniece & Rena were combined into a single character and became Marie
- C. Levee became Leonard "Lenny" Rufus Johnson the II
- D. Booker became Oscar
- E. Troy Maxson became Walter Lewis

There were four moments in my show that came directly from the works of August Wilson. I was planning on using Levee's monologue from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Becker's monologue from *Jitney*, Cory's Monologue and the confrontation scene between Cory and Troy from *Fences*. Since I couldn't use this text directly, I decided to use them as reference; I molded scenes and moments in my script that entailed similar dynamics, language, and themes from these original pulled dialogues. My new ideas and script writing were approved and I was able to move forward in my rehearsal process.

5.2 Rehearsal Schedule & Space

The ensemble was fortunate to have a mapped out rehearsal schedule provided for us. This schedule explained in detail rehearsal times and locations. Locations varied from large classrooms to the Studio Theatre itself. This really helped reduce a lot of worries and concern regarding when I could rehearse my piece. I originally thought that my rehearsals would be the most effective if in a rehearsal space, but I was wrong. My first days of

rehearsing in the space were weird and honestly a waste of time. I found myself sitting in the space unsure of what to block and it didn't help not knowing my lines. So I decided to take a week off from rehearsing in the space and just focus on drafting blocking ideas and learning my lines at home. This choice helped me tremendously because I was able to come up with a plethora of cool ideas. When I returned to the rehearsal space I felt assured and ready to put my choices into action. I enjoyed working in Room 135 and despised Room 125 due to its size and uncontrollable thermostat. I benefited the most from working in the Studio Theatre because it was the actual show venue.

5. 3 M.F.A. Acting Training Application

During my rehearsal process I experimented with different techniques in aims of being fully intellectually, emotionally, vocally, and physically connected to my characters and the world of the play. I benefited the most from the following techniques of: F.M. Alexander, Uta Hagen, Lee Strasberg, and Sanford Meisner.

With the Alexander Technique I explored finding physical freedom and releasing unneeded muscular tension in my body. Taking on five characters called for not only lots of distinct physical choices, but also the need to move effortlessly and effectively in the space. During rehearsals I became aware of my natural habitual movement choices and came to a stark realization that I had to deconstruct my movement pattern in order to be in service to my character's movement. I achieved this through constructive rest, the upright principle, and inhibition. Constructive rest was very effective because I was able to clear my mind of things that didn't pertain to my thesis. At the time, I dealt with a plethora of things, brought these issues into rehearsals, and let them distract me immensely. Construct rest was my remedy.

Once my mind was cleared and I was keenly focused on the task at hand, the upright principle and inhibition allowed me to find physical freedom. I found I held tension in my lower back and hips. Prior to my Alexander training, I was constantly trying to force myself into alignment. This did nothing but increase my muscular tension, so it was my goal to not fall back into that habit during rehearsals. Practicing inhibition gave me the freedom from muscular tension that I needed in order to freely and creatively make physical choices for my characters. I used Laban Movement Analysis to aid me during this process. My goal was to not just find movement choices that would make each character distinct, but also find physical choices that would be authentically connected to each character's need and purpose in the space. My end results are detailed in Chapter 6

Uta Hagen's method helped me to intellectually connect to my characters. Through Uta Hagen's Six Steps, also known as nine essential questions (Hagen 134), I was able to construct and develop a world around my characters based off their facts. An example of this are Cliff's answers found below:

1. WHO AM I?

- Clifton Nathaniel Lewis. I am nineteen years old. I am very respectful, compassionate, and optimistic. I grew up in Montgomery, Alabama and my current address is 1906 Williamson Street. Walter Lewis is my unsupportive father. We used to have a very close relationship, but since I've come into manhood he's become more of a tyrant than loving father. I love jazz music and deep fried southern cuisine. My love for these two things inspired me to work as the bus boy at Ella Mae's. I'm a dreamer by day and bus boy by night. Ella Mae's music and atmosphere helps me feel that my dreams of becoming a singer could

become a tangible reality. I'm confident in my artistic abilities, but also apprehensive of taking the step needed to achieve my dreams. I fear possible rejection and my father intimidates me.

2. WHAT TIME IS IT?

- It's Saturday and 11:30pm, during the 20th century (1940s), and a humid summer night.

3. WHERE AM I?

- Ella Mae's Southern Juke Joint, store front location in Montgomery, Alabama, and I'm cleaning up on the dance floor.

4. WHAT SURROUNDS ME?

- A platform and vintage mic stand, table and chair, alcohol bottle and two shot glasses, wooden piano and stool, folding screen, vintage juke box and table, and unforeseen visitors.

5. WHAT ARE THE GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES?

- PAST- My dad and I fought over my decision to be a performer. He doesn't support this idea due to his failed attempt to become a cotton club singer.
- PRESENT- The crowd has just left and I have twenty minutes to clean the entire juke joint or Oscar will dock my pay.

6. WHAT IS MY RELATIONSHIP?

- I am an employee at Ella Mae's. Oscar is a father figure to me, Lenny reminds me of that one aggravating and drunk uncle that nobody likes to be around, and Marie is my sassy and sophisticated mother figure. Music and I are one. I wake up and go to sleep thinking about it!

7. WHAT DO I WANT?

- CHARACTER'S NEED- To be accepted and supported by my father.
- IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE- To clean Ella Mae's in twenty minutes and shut it down.

8. WHAT IS IN MY WAY?

- CHARACTER'S NEED- Stubborn father, fear and self-doubt, and lack of effective father-to-son communication.
- IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE- Time and the guest.

9. WHAT DO I DO TO GET WHAT I WANT?

- CHARACTER'S NEED- I confront my dad and boldly express my pent of feelings and emotions.
- IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE- I initially try to scare them off, but end up offering hospitality.

I wouldn't call myself a "method" actor, but I find Lee Strasberg's affective memory useful if safely applied. As actors we aim to authentically emote. There are a plethora of methods and techniques that aid in this goal and affective memory sometimes works for me. The affective memory that I chose to reflect upon and use during my rehearsal process was a particular fight between my father and I. As stated earlier, I connected with Cory Maxson from *Fences* due to our father's lack of support and tense relationships. On one particular evening my father and I couldn't see eye to eye on a particular situation. This disagreement turned into a physical altercation and till this day I haven't forgiven my dad or moved on. This particular experience resonated with me and I felt compelled to use it for Cliff. I emotionally prepared rehearsal after rehearsal until I felt that this experience was rich, brewing, and alive in me. I accompanied this preparation by playing Mahalia Jackson's

“Precious Lord.” This emotional preparation served me well in delivering Cliff’s final monologue.

I’ve really grown to appreciate the works of Sanford Meisner. I find it very rewarding for scene work because it helps you to really be connected in the moment and focused on the “other” rather than self. I unfortunately didn’t have a scene partner during rehearsals, so I focused on living in imaginary circumstances. Once I devised my imaginary circumstances per character, I imagined that I wasn’t just doing their monologue, but instead engaging in an active incident with someone else. My imagination grew more and more per rehearsal. I also incorporated the imaginary facts I drafted through Uta Hagen’s steps to sharpen my character’s point-of-view. I did this for my remaining four characters.

5.4 Character Transitions & Distinctions

Doing a one-man show can become very difficult when its time to transition from character to character. In my show I had five characters, which meant that I had to come up with creative ways to transition from character to character. My first idea was to use the space. I would walk on stage as a character, walk off, and then walk back on and be a different character. During an evening rehearsal with George Judy, he pointed out that these frequent off stage transitions caused my show to drop in energy and overall lose the magical quality that audience members love to experience while viewing character work. He then suggested that I use a diagonal plane in the space and with it place one character on one end and the other character on the opposite end. With this diagonal plane, I could talk to someone and when it was time to transition into a different character I could simply turn around and talk to the other person on the opposite end of the plane. This worked perfectly in scenes between Marie and Cliff or Lenny and Cliff. With Lenny I decided to use

the platform to help with transition between him and Cliff. Lenny would stand on the platform and Cliff would step down, but leave one foot still on the platform. Leaving a foot on the platform helped me transition from Cliff to Lenny faster.

I decided to use a costume piece to distinguish characters. I found that a golf hat was the best option. Cliff would wear his golf hat regularly, Marie would take the golf hat and use it as a fan, Lenny would tilt the hat to the side, and Oscar and Walter would wear the golf hat backwards. Oscar would also wear a blazer to accompany his backwards golf hat. This choice helped distinguish him from Walter. I also explored different physical and vocal choices in my character work and I was able to map out and become more secure in my characters through the use of Laban Movement Analysis, which will be detailed in the next chapter.

5.5 Music & Dance Inclusion

From my original musical selection list I narrowed it down to “Sophisticated Lady” by Duke Ellington, “Basin Street Blues” written by Spencer Williams and recorded by Louie Armstrong, “God Blessed a Child” by Billie Holiday, and “Summertime” composed by George Gershwin and recorded by Ella Fitzgerald. I decided that Cliff would sing “Sophisticated Lady” in an effort to showcase his voice to the audience, Lenny would sing “Basin Street Blues” in an effort to receive affirmation from Cliff, Marie would sing “God Blessed a Child” in an effort to encourage Cliff live a life that he would be proud of, and Cliff would sing “Summertime” at the end of the show once he receives his father’s support. I purchased all my sheet music from musicnotes.com.

Once I confirmed my musical selections and received my sheet music, the only thing that was missing was an accompanist. I first reached out to Louis, our Musical Theatre

pianist, but unfortunately he had church engagements. I then reached out to Maria, our Musical Theatre pianist sub, but she could only be available for one day. Curran Latas, an undergrad particularly interested in Musical Theatre, offered to play for me. I became overjoyed as my stress melted away in that moment. This joy melted away as well two weeks later when Curran informed me that due to his obligation to *A Christmas Carol*, he would be unable to play. I instantly went into panic mode. My show was in two weeks and I had no accompanist! So I reached out to several accompanists in the Baton Rouge area. Some instantly replied and offered to play if I paid them. I had no problem paying my accompanist, but their quotes were absolutely ridiculous. One lady told me that I would have to pay her \$200.00 up front, a \$100.00 every performance, and \$50.00 every rehearsal. Fortunately, I met Kristin Eliason, accompanist for the School of Music, who offered to play for me for practically free!

Kristin and I hit it off instantly. She was so professional, cared about my vision, and was just an overall joy to work with. We met up five times before my tech rehearsals. Every time we met she knew the music and was so easy to work with. She was a classical pianist and had always wanted to play jazz, but was never afforded the opportunity until now! During my tech rehearsal, Nick Erickson suggested that I find a way to incorporate her into my show. Prior to this suggestion, she just entered when it was time for me to sing. I took Nick's suggestion and our characters' relationship dynamics were praised heavily from audience members. I expound on my process incorporating Kristin into the show in the next section.

I decided that the best way to incorporate dance in my show could be during my dreamscape and also through Cliff in several moments during the show. Originally in my

dreamscape, the dance was viewpoints based with some freestyle dance movements. There were several elements that I explored but I was particularly drawn to repetition, gestures, and space. I then selected “What Happens to a Dream Deferred” from the Original Cast Recording of *Harlem Song* by George C. Wolfe. I was particularly drawn to this song because the vocalist sings “What Happens to a Dream Deferred,” the original poem by Harlem Renaissance icon Langston Hughes. I wanted to explore how the movement stemmed from the lyrics. I met with Nick Erickson, Associate Professor (Movement)/Associate Head, M.F.A. Acting, during private coachings in the movement studio and together we furthered my exploration with the aforementioned elements. I then met with Sandra Parks, Head of Dance, and together we were able to focus on the storytelling of the piece through dance movement. Since the song was a ballad, we explored movement that had a flowing quality to it until the song reached its climax. From this point we focused on larger gestures and sharper movements to contrast with earlier movements. Through Nick and Sandra’s guidance we were able to create a piece of movement and dance that was effective in storytelling and emotionally compelling.

5.6 Audience & Accompanist Involvement

I really wanted to explore how I could make my show very interactive. I wanted my audience to feel as if they were apart of the show. During a rehearsal, I discovered that this could be accomplished if I break the fourth wall and talk directly to the audience. Establishing purposeful circumstances that would allow characters to talk directly to them could accomplish this. So I decided to pretend as if the audience were visiting latecomers from Louisiana. Cliff would notice them after his dreamscape, promise to escort them out, but never get the opportunity to due to interactions with other characters. It would seem as

if they were real, but they would just be figments of Cliff's imagination. Cliff is a dreamer and from the beginning of the show the audience would see how wrapped up he can get in his own thoughts and desires. I also wanted to explore performing in the audience's seating bank. During a rehearsal I found that Marie could pretend that she's looking for a fast girl whom she believes is creeping around with Cliff. She could go through the seating bank demanding that the girl show herself. Lenny could also go into the seating bank when he looks for Felix, his ex band mate.

I had to find a way to interact with my accompanist in my show. So I decided that the accompanist would play Miles, the juke joint piano player and also Felix, Lenny's ex band mate. Through this choice she would aid in my storytelling and her entrances and exits would be purposeful. Kristin dressed in masculine attire to help become more convincing as a man. She wore a fedora, wide length slacks, a white button up, and a tie. Kristin had very little acting experience, but she was overjoyed that she had the opportunity to act in my show. She was so used to accompanying and just sitting at pianos, but in my show she was able to step out of her comfort zone!

5.7 Voiceover & Introductory Video

I was very excited about recording all the character voiceovers for my show, but during a rehearsal I noticed that the majority of my show's cues were auditory. From this I gathered that if I moved forward with my original voiceover concept the audience would listen to tracks more than watching the live show. Another issue that became apparent was that the voiceovers limited the experience that I wanted my audience to have. August Wilson is known for his controversial story lines and dramatic/raw action that is driven throughout his plays. I knew that it wouldn't matter how much time I dedicated to my

voiceovers, nothing could replace live in your face action. So I scratched this idea and began to craft a show that would showcase my ability to do character work vocally and physically.

However, I decided to allow Walter, Cliff's possessive father, to remain a voiceover for the majority of the show. I wanted his voice to haunt Cliff throughout the play. His voice would be in Cliff's head and stop him every time he came close to breaking out of Walter's mental bondage. Walter has a grip on Cliff even in his absence, and I want the audience to really see this! The audience would hear Walter's voiceover when Cliff dances in the beginning of the show and when he sings *Sophisticated Lady*. Walter's voiceovers would cease once he actually appears in the juke joint to confront Cliff.

I was ecstatic about my introductory video. I devised a video concept plan and began seeking talent. I had a meeting with Joshua Overbay, Assistant Professor of Film and Television, pitched my ideas and after a very serious meeting I canceled my introductory video idea. The first issue was that it was financially impossible at the time. I had a small budget to dedicate to my show and between renting a rehearsal space, buying costumes and décor, and paying someone to record and edit the video I knew that I couldn't finance this pursuit. So I decided that I could accomplish the same effect through the use of dim lights, an authentic set design, and playing popular music from the period during my green show.

Chapter 6: Finalized Character Development

In the middle of my writing process I noticed that I wrote nine pages and had only introduced three characters. This meant that I would have to either cut characters or completely change my original storyline due to only having thirty-four minutes to perform. I decided to cut Ruth and combine key characteristics of Berniece and Rena to create one female character. As stated earlier in my rehearsal process, all original character names were changed in effort to stay clear of any intellectual property violations.

1. Clifton “Cliff” Lewis (Based off of Cory from *Fences*)- is the teenage son of Walter Lewis. He is nineteen years old, respectful, compassionate, and a very optimistic young man. He works as the bus boy at Ella Mae’s not only to earn money, but because he is infatuated with jazz music. The music and atmosphere helps him feel that his dreams of becoming a singer could become a tangible reality. He’s ambitious and has the talent and determination to realize his dreams, but is apprehensive of taking that next step in order to actually achieve them. He fears possible rejection and is intimidated by his father Walter, who refuses to support him in his pursuit.

A. Physically

- a. Space- Indirect
- b. Weight- Light
- c. Time- Sudden
- d. Flow- Bound/Free

B. Vocally

- a. Pitch- Light/Medium
- b. Tempo/Rate- Mid

- c. Tone- Slightly Resonant
- 2. Marie (Based off of Berniece from *The Piano Lesson* and Rena from *Jitney*)- is Ella Mae's sultry and fierce waitress who is in her early thirties. She calls it like she sees it and serves as the voice of femininity and maternity in the show. She is constantly fighting her brother James and is still in mourning for her husband's death. She's overwhelmed with grief and has trust issues.
 - A. Physically
 - a. Space- Direct
 - b. Weight- Light
 - c. Time- Sustained
 - d. Flow-Free
 - B. Vocally
 - a. Pitch- High
 - b. Tempo/Rate- Mid-Fast
 - c. Tone- Rich and Soothing
- 3. Lenny (Based off of Levee from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*)- is the temporary entertainment at Ella Mae's. He was originally asked to do a few gigs, but has been there for over a year. He's in his late twenties, not well educated, but stylish, brash, energetic, and ambitious. Levee sings and plays in a new, improvisational jazz style and dreams about re-forming his old band. Although he can be the life of the party, he is a hot head and deals with anger management issues. Once his anger and frustration is sparked, he can become a problem that nobody can handle.

A. Physically

- a. Space- Direct
- b. Weight- Light
- c. Time- Sudden
- d. Flow-Free

B. Vocally

- a. Pitch- High
- b. Tempo/Rate- Fast
- c. Tone- Raspy

4. Oscar (Based off of Becker from *Jitney*)- is the owner of Ella Mae's. He is an older man of about sixty, he is quiet, wise, and set in his ways. He is a man of very little words and has the power to move people whenever he does speak. He is also a widower and lost his son a few years back. Ella Mae's has become his life and is the reason why he is still alive.

A. Physically

- a. Space- Indirect
- b. Weight- Strong
- c. Time- Sustained
- d. Flow-Bound

B. Vocally

- a. Pitch- Low
- b. Tempo/Rate- Slow
- c. Tone- Rich, Resonant, and Breathy

5. Walter Lewis (Based off of Troy from *Fences*)- is Cliff's stubborn, over-protective

working class father, and is in his forties. He instigates conflict due to his inability to accept other's choices in life, especially Cliff's, when they differ from his own philosophy.

A. Physically

- a. Space- Direct
- b. Weight- Strong
- c. Time- Sustained
- d. Flow-Bound

B. Vocally

- a. Pitch- Low
- b. Tempo/Rate- Mid-Slow
- c. Tone- Resonant and Commanding

Chapter 7: Augmented Renaissance: From Creation to Revelation Final Script

Lights rise to show an empty jazz juke joint. An antique piano is DSR, a platform and vintage microphone/stand is DSC, and a table with two chairs is DSL. Cliff is sitting on the edge of the stage frozen and gazing DSL with a look of terror on his face. The events of the play will cause this pose to be re-created towards the end of the play. Cliff snaps out of his frozen state and goes upstage to get his broom. As he sweeps the floor he is swept into some sort of dreamscape. During this moment Langston Hughes' Dream Deferred is spoken softly while underscored by Ella Fitzgerald's It Don't Mean a Thing. Cliff does a viewpoint physical piece/Swing Dance Combo during this dreamscape. He is snapped out of it due to hearing a voiceover of his Father. He gathers himself together and attempts to clean as quickly as possible until he realizes that some latecomers have joined him...the audience.

CLIFF: Oh.. I didn't know we still had guest in the building. Oh you're coming to see the show? (He looks down at his watch) I'm very sorry but it's close to midnight and we're actually shutting the place down. Why yall come so late? You know the whole city shuts down at midnight. You wont find anything around this time except a bunch of rag-a-muffins who aint gone do nothing but talk a bunch of baloney or try to double-cross ya if they see yall on the street. So if I were yall, I'd scram and get back to ya crib. Ohh yall from Louisiana, well I be! Well by the looks of yall spiffy rags I should've known! (Slight Laugh) Don't nobody dress like that round here (Full Laugh) Yall must be trying to look like them glad raggin Harlem cats. (Laughs even harder, but then realizes he went too far) Ohh excuse my rudeness! I'm Cliff, the big shot around here, and welcome to Ella Mae's. Give me a few minutes and I'll escort yall to the Inn where yall can stay for the night.

MARIE: Now who is you in here beating your gums to chile? I know you're not in here with some fast tail floozy! Where's the little dumb dora at? Come on out miss thang, its late, we're closing up, so you gone have to skedaddle on back to wherever you came from! Girl where you at? You aint gotta go home, but you gotta get the hell on outta-

CLIFF: (Cuts her off) Marie will you stop, you're embarrassing me in front of our guest.

MARIE: Guests? What guest? (She laughs) Now baby I'm no pushover or sap so your gonna have to do a better job with your fib. (He tries to interrupt her, but fails) Look I'm just messin wit cha! What you with your bearcats is none of my beeswax, but honey please pipe down and finish your rounds before Oscar come in and here start fussin, okay?

CLIFF: Yes'm. (Aside) Well ladies and gents that Marie. The prettiest and most attitudinal waitress you'll ever set your eyes on. Well her and Oscar go way back and if you ask me I think she gotta thing for Mr. Big Cheese, but lets keep that between us. Truth is... Oscar is the real owner of this joint, I'm just the bus boy, and this is my sophisticated broom Louie. Together me and Lou make some fantastic tunes! Did you know the NAACP and National Urban League said that me and Lou were the ultimate jukin dynamic duo? You see they understand and appreciate us! (kisses broom and puts it upstage of stage)

MARIE: CLIFTON NATHANIEL LEWIS...LESS JABBIN AND MORE WORKING! I swear if brains were leather, you wouldn't have enough to saddle a junebug!

CLIFF: Alright Marie! (Aside) Like I was saying, wait...where was I? Ohh yea, you see in this jukin jazz world me and Lou have a voice, but here at Ella Mae's were only good for cleaning up after the crowd leaves. Anyways back to Oscar. When his old lady Ella died his life became a complete drag. So he opened up this place, named it in her honor, and it has turned into the most jumpin jazz joint here in the South. Initially Oscar would play tunes from the jukebox, until Marie came in one night after a fight with her brother and offered to donate her family's piano to the place. Now Oscar thought she would come and just drop the piano off and be on her way, but she came back the next day and insisted that she be hired as a waitress so that she could keep an eye on it! (He crosses over to the piano)

Wanna know a secret...Well do you? Okay...some nights when everyone has left...I sneak in here, and with the help of Miles, I work on my singing. You see it's my dream to be a entertainer. I wanna be the next Duke Ellington, Cab Callaway, or even Jelly Roll Morton! Yall from Louisiana, so I know yall know all about Jelly Roll! Problem is my old man wants me to abandon my dreams and get a real job. You see my dad, Walter Lewis, had the same dream as I do now, but before he could achieve it he met my ma, knocked her up, and they moved down here where she had me! Now he works as a trash compactor and he wont get off my back about me wanting to be a singer. If he knew I was here, he'd kill me so once again...lets keep this between us! Would you like to hear me sing something real quick? I could really use the honest feedback. Ohh It'll be fine Marie is out in the back talking to Lenny. Who is Lenny? Trust me he's the kind of guy who you'll hear before you see. Yall seem like cool cats, please don't judge me too hard... Hey Miles hit me with Sophie!

(He sings Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Lady, and at the end of it he gazes again DSL and hears the voiceover of his Father. Cliff takes a step off the stage)

LENNY: Hold up...Wait a Minute...STOP THE PRESS...Now I know your not telling me that you can do more than sweep and clean? Boy you can sing?

CLIFF: Pipe down before Oscar and Marie hear you. Yea I can do a lil sumthin sumthin. (Turn to Audience) Guys this is Lenny, Lenny meet our guest all the way from Louisiana.

LENNY: (Starts Clapping) Attaboy...Attaboy! Wait Guest? Now I know your not in here talking to yourself again. My..My...My...I told Oscar that ya lights are on, but nobody's home! (He Laughs) Anyways...I need you to level with me I wrote this song awhile back and im thinking about singing it tomorrow night. I need you to tell me if it's jumpin. Now where is my sax case?

CLIFF: Len, why do you carry a sax case and you don't even know how to play the saxophone?

LENNY: (Stares at Him with a Deadpan Look on His Face) Now why you asking all them questions? I done told you about being all up in grown folk business! (He Laughs) Cliff...you

know me and you got a lot in common. We both got talent! Boy me and you can form a band of our own...well call it Lenny and the Footstompers. I'll do the singing and you'll be the main foot stomper! You know how to stomp don't ya?

CLIFF: Yes Lenny I know how to stomp, but look it's my dream to have a band of my own and one-day ima take over the world. One day...I'm just too scared to do it man. You know every time I think I'm ready to go through with it, I just run away and I don't know why! It'll happen one-day Len trust and believe it. But enough about me...Lenny you can't carry a tune in a bucket! Every time you sing you sound like you just finished swallowing a mouth full of marbles. Not to mention that when you perform you bring the whole house down... NO LITERALLY! The whole place be jumping until you open up your mouth.

LENNY: The Hell! Now you know I can blow and one day you gone wish you were in my band! You see the problem is this... me and the club just be on two different wavelengths, and as soon as they learn to get in the pocket this place will jump like never before. Now gone and sit down over there, watch, and learn! Where's my ciggy? (Opens up his Sax Case to find a joint. He holds it up and examines it) Naw...ima save that for later! (LAUGHS)

Now Cory you ever been to New Orleans? Man, they got some dolls down there...OOOO WEE! You see Me and my ex-band mate Felix went down there because we were the entertainment for the night at this place called Teddy's down by Basin Street. It was our dream to make a record and perform at the Tin Pan Alley, so this was the perfect start on our journey to the top! So we got up there and sang this song that we had been working on for a minute.

(Light change to the platform and the audience is taken back to Teddy's.)

LENNY: Felix...Felix...Boy if you don't bring yo lil ass out here, we up!!!

(Same character playing Miles, runs out and becomes Felix and together they perform Basin Street Blues. Song ends with an Applause Sound Effect.)

(To Audience) Thank You Very Much Ladies and Gents, stick around for more music and good times! (Back to Cliff) Well right before it was time for us to go, I spotted this hot little flapper by the Gin Mill, and I knew right then and there that I had to get her to come back to the shack with me...if you catch my drift. So I walked up to her (Walks Up to Female Audience Member within the first 3 rows in Center Seating Bank) and said, "Hey doll, you know a gal like you... need a man like me! You see I got style and I know how to treat a woman. They don't call me Sweet Lemonade for nothing. So look here sugar, all I wanna know is....can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen? Because you look prettier than a glob of butter melting on a stack of wheat cakes!" Now I had this dame right in my hand, I mean right there, and before I could get to her Felix cut in and started actin like he was the big time cat daddy of our group. So I looked at him and said, "Now hold up...Felix you know you're not the head of this here band. I write all the music and you just jig from side to side!" He replied, "Len what you talking about? You cant even spell music!" THE HELL..I can spell music. I gotta dollar say I can spell it. Talking bout I can't spell music.

Music....M-U-S-I-K. There! Now GIMMIE my dollar?" So him and the gal started laughing and in aims to impress the gal, he threw a penny at me and said that was all I was worth! Before I knew it I was hotter than a skillet of cracking grease.

Now why you gotta embarrass me like that? See! That's the shit im talking about. You just can't let me be, you always gotta mess with me. But im tired of you Felix. You don't know me. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating in here. I don't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of and every time I get close to having just a piece of something, its negroes like you that gotta snatch it away from me. Well I'm tired Felix...I'm tired! No now you listen to me! My name is Lenny Rufus Johnson the II, you hear me? I'm the reason we here, I write all our songs, I come up with all the music, I BREAK MY BACK, and for what? To be slapped right across the jaw by my own band mate! So you be gone, because I don't know you anymore! Just gone and keep turning ya back on me. Naw...Gone Felix turn your back on me! Motherfucka you better turn around! I'll cut your heart out, you heartless devil. What's the matter? Where is you? I was making it before you and I'll do the same without you. Life aint shit and you right there with it!

(Lights transition back to Ella Mae's and Lenny resumes his convo with Cliff)

So Felix jumped on me and before I knew it I stabbed him with my pocketknife. I didn't mean to kill him. I didn't mean a word I said. I was just so hot and tired of being sick and tired! So in that moment I dropped everything, took off, and I've been running ever since. I traveled from Louisiana to Mississippi to Alabama and now im here in Georgia working here. I never reached my dream with my band, but hey at least im here. I'm able to be around music that I love and most importantly im alive, which is the least I can say for Felix. Cliff you don't wanna turn out like me...a runner! You gotta face whatever demons are holding you back from reaching your dream. I was too cowardly to face mine. I allowed them to get the best of me, push me over the top, kill a man who was like a brother to me, and has had me running like a chicken with its head cut off. I say all this because I heard you sing, and you got some talent kid! I believe in your gift and believe it or not I believe in you! Now I don't know what's causing you to be fearful, that aint none of my business, and honestly I don't want to know. But I'll tell you this, Fear has two meanings...You can either continue to Forget Everything And Run or you can Face Everything And Rise. So kid...the choice is yours, but I don't care what you say you aint got nothing on me! And there's no need to tell me about my song...I know its gonna be a hit! Man wait until I tell Oscar...

CLIFF: Lenny please don't! Lenny....

LENNY: (Exits UL while still talking) He is gonna flip! Young Cliff can sing and this whole time been glued to that broom. Hey Oscar...OSCAR...you gotta come out here! Man...CLIFF CAN SAAANG!

OSCAR: (Enters UL) Now what is all this rambling I hear of you being able to sing? I know you aint been pushing that there broom all this while, when you could've been up there on that microphone! Now we can always find someone to clean up this place, but raw

talent...now we aint got much of that round here. And to be honest, I don't know how much more of that there Lenny we gone be able to take. I don't know what we were thinking hiring that fool. But anyway...Lemme hear you sing something. Boy what's the matter? You need to warm up? You need time to practice? (Waits a moment for Cliff to respond) Then what's the matter, what ya scared? I know ya daddy didn't raise you to be scared! He probably elated at the fact that his boy can sing, cuz lawd knows he was the best sanger I think I ever heard on this side of heaven. So what you think he'll say if he finds out that you scared? You cant be scared with that kind of support! He supports you right? (Waits for response) Hmm...that's what it is huh...? Jesus Walter...

I can tell you a thing or two about the effects of fatherless support. I used to have the best relationship with my baby boy Morris. We called him Moe. He was the pride and joy of my life, the spitting image of me and everything. And as a child, me and his mama spoiled his lil tail rotten, lawd he was rotten to the core! Which is probably why he ended up the way he did....in prison. The boy was so used to being spoon fed everything and it made him lazy. He wanted everything handed to him, and that is not how life works, especially down here! Well anyway, long story short the boy went off and killed this poor gal cuz she lied on him. Just ruined his life, threw it away like it wasn't worth nothing because he couldn't put his pride to the side. Well when that happened, our lives turned completely upside down. I couldn't walk down the street without people pointing at me. Talking about me behind my back. "There go his father. That's him. What kind of man would raise a boy to do something like that?" He marked me and the only thing I was guilty of was bringing him into this world. We lived like that for years until things finally calmed down. Now I'm the boss of this here juke joint. I got me a nice little house. It aint much, but its mine. I worked twenty-seven years at the mill...got me a pension. I got respect. But what I aint got is a son that did me honor...The Bible say, "honor thy father and they mother." I aint got that. I aint got a son I could be proud of. A son to come up behind me...living a good honest decent life. I got a killer a murderer for a son! Now I know that's rather rash and cold, but those were the exact words I told him that night. It was a cold rainy night in April and I was getting ready to close the place up. I was getting ready to hit the switch when I heard someone say...

MOE: Why didn't you come to see me Pop? I waited 20 years for you to come see me. Answer me...why did you turn your back on me?

(Gets up and crosses DC, lights fade)

OSCAR: Now why you had to go and do what you did? What law is there say you have to kill somebody if they tell a lie on you? Who taught you that? Me and ya ma sure didn't! It was a lie! The gal told a lie! We could have fought the lie together! But you took it upon yourself to fight alone, and son you fought for the wrong team! Now I taught you two wrongs don't make a right, I taught you to respect life and that all of life is precious. You could have been something. You had every advantage...I tried to fix it so you didn't have to follow up behind me...so you could go on and go further. So you could have a better life. I did without so you could have! And you got the nerve to look me in my face and say I turned my back on you? Negro me and your mama broke our backs for you and that was how you repaid us? By turning into some killer? Well I guess you're a double murderer! Your mama took sick the

day that judge sentenced you and she never walked or said another word or ate another thing for twenty-three days. She just laid up in that room and grieved for you until she died. You killed her!

But I was there. I was holding her hand when she died. Where were you? Ohh that's right...locked up in a cage like some animal. That's what killed her. To hear the judge say that you were unfit to live. That you be "remanded to the custody of the Commissioner of Corrections at Western State Penitentiary and there to be execute in the electric chair. This order to be carried out thirty days from that day." That's what killed her. She didn't want to live them thirty days. She didn't want to be alive to hear on the eleven o'clock news that they had killed you. So don't you say nothing to me about turning my back when I nursed that woman, talked to her, held her hand, prayed over her and the last words to come out of her mouth was your name. I was there! Where were your Mr. Murderer? Mr. Unfit to Live Amongst Society. Where were you when your mama was dying and calling your name? That was the reason why I never came and saw you! Ohh naw...you weren't going to kill me like you killed your mother. I wouldn't be able to stomach seeing you wearing some jumper, identified by some numerical digits, behind some bars! Now you might have escaped the electric chair and served your 20 years, but you will not escape the truth and reality of the pain you inflicted upon this family! You are my son...But from this moment on...I'm calling the deal off. You aint nothing to me, boy. Just another Negro on the street! Now if you will excuse me, I must be on my way.

(Crosses back DR and is back in Ella Mae's)

Now The Bible say, "Life and death lie in the power of the tongue." For you see the tongue is sharper than a two edge sword and the same tongue that can speak life, can be the same tongue that can take life away. Five days after I spoke to Moe, I gotta call from the police station and they informed me that they found my boy dead. He had a major heart attack and was found a couple miles up the street. All he wanted was my support, my love, but just like him... I couldn't put my pride to the side! Hmmm....like father like son, aint that something. He was in jail for 20 years, I had 20 years to forgive him, and be there for him once he got out, but I refused to swallow that pill. Now look at me...No Wife...No Son...No Family! So like I said I can tell you a thing or two about fatherless support. And I tell you this because I don't want you or your father to end up like me or my Moe! You put your fear and your pride to the side, and you talk to your father and you tell him how you feel. Tell him how vital it is that he supports you. You hear me boy? Now get on up there and let me see what you got!

MARIE: Now I'm the only doll around here and I've been working twice...no five times harder than all yall fools. How the hell yall expect for us to get outta here at a descent hour if we don't all throw a lil elbow grease into the skillet? This is not even my juke joint, but lord knows if it was I would...ohh HEY OSCAR! I didn't see you there, but since you and Mr. Dreamer are here can you please give me a hand.

(Walks toward audience member DR of seating bank with two cups, turns, and realizes that Oscar has snuck off)

Well I be damn! Well mister is looks like its just you and I and since you cant seem to do your job, do me a favor and listen loud and clear to what I'm about to tell you...you can do that right? (Hands an audience member the cups and talks to them as if they are Cliff), Thank the heavens! Honey what in the Sam hell is your problem? Now don't give me that look! I know all about you wanting to be a singer, chile I been knew! I see you practicing your little dance moves and singing when you think nobody is listening all the time! Besides where do you think your at the Cotton Deluxe in Harlem? Chile this is Ella Mae's you know these walls are so thin you could hear a rat piss on cotton! Now I'm not gonna pacify you nor beat around the bush because I've been there and done that far to many times in my past. Cliff you need to get out of your own way and take advantage of what time you have! Time is free, but it's priceless. You can't own it, but you can use it. You can't keep it, but you can spend it. And once you've lost it you can never get it back. So stop wasting your time in this place, go out there, make something of yourself, and live a life of your own! You know this reminds me of a song my mammy used to sing to me. She would say... (Sings God Blessed a Child A capella)

(Laughs) Ohh you didn't know I could sing myself now did you? Surprise...Surprise! Baby get your own, you hear me? Now give me these damn cups, you aint gone clean em! (Takes one cup from Audience Member)

CLIFF: (Holds on to one cup)I got it, I got it, and Marie...Thanks!

MARIE: Bless you whole heart baby and don't thank me yet. Thank me by sending me a few dollars once you cut your first record!

CLIFF: (Laughs) Okay...

(Cliff sits down on edge of stage and ponders on what to do next. He goes to stand up, and notices his father standing DSL. He gazes with a look of terror and is frozen.

WALTER (VOICEOVER): CLIFTON LEWIS... WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!?

CLIFF: You finally found me, huh? Thought you'd be too tied up with work to even realize I was missing. Work always did come number one in ya life. Work....Work....Work, and maybe just maybe, I'll squeeze in some quality time with the family. I see you found just an ounce of quality time after all. (Laughs) You know its crazy, but it took me running off to some juke joint for you to even realize I existed in the same space as you. But I did daddy, I've been livin right under you all these years. Living under your coldness, your bitterness, and your rash obscenities! All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. Every time I heard your footsteps in the house. Wondering all the time... what's Papa gonna say if he finds out I can sing?... What's he gonna do if he knows I wanna be a singer? But, I ain't scared of you any more! So just let me be daddy...let me be!

WALTER: Found You...I found you? You were never lost, nor am I here to collect you! Now Come here boy...I said come here.

(Cliff walks DSL and becomes Walter)

Straighten up Godddamnit... Now I asked you a question...I found you? Ohh silly boy, I've always known ya whereabouts. You think a man who has raised his child, don't know a thing or two when it comes to him? I'm your father and you are my son. Your half of me! My gifts and talents were planted in you from birth. I planted that seed in you, and it wasn't by accident. I've sat back and watched that seed of hope and fulfillment bloom into a garden of manifested prosperity. You cant help who you are nor what you want to become! Nor can I or anyone in this world, block you from what God has in store for you! I know there's a calling on your life and that your bound for greatness. All I wanted to do was push you, to be your biggest challenge. Cuz lawd knows, if you could bypass me...shit...then nothing could stand in your way boy, but yourself! Son the truth is that nothing worth having is ever easy, and all the best things in life are the result of pain and frustration. The more you have to struggle to achieve it, the lest likely you'll take it for granted. So know...I didn't find you....you found yourself! You wanna sing....then hell sing! You wanna dance...then boy you betta dance till ya outta ya shoes and socks! And If ya wanna be like ya old man, ha...well that's impossible, because your better than me! I love ya boy, and don't you ever forget it...so lets see what you got!

(Cliff crosses to Center and approaches the microphone)

CLIFF: (To Audience) Well...I guess this is it. (Turns and Looks at Dad) Who am I talking to? I'm talking to the Guest... (Looks out to audience and realizes that no one was ever there and then looks towards Walter) No one dad. MILES...you know what to play!

(Miles and Cliff perform George Gershwin's Summertime and lights fade

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Audience Feedback

I was very overwhelmed by the praise and feedback that I received after my performances. I was fortunate to establish a connection with New Venture Theatre, an up and coming community theatre in Baton Rouge, and their ensemble supported me during my first performance. They're known for doing Black Drama and have had their share of August Wilson productions. My show reminded them once again how valuable his work was and the impact that it can make if produced authentically and properly. I was even invited to audition for a couple of their main stage shows during their upcoming season. Several faculty, students, and staff members also praised my work. Shannon Walsh, Assistant Professor of Theatre History, even said, "Amar, after watching your show I realized how much LSU has done a disservice to you!" This comment really hit home for me because I knew that I possessed several skills that could be showcased, but due to Swine Palace's play selection committee, the opportunity was never afforded. This comment further solidified my decision to mold my thesis around things that I was genuinely passionate about!

8.2 Future Development

I really don't know what is in store for this show in the future. I would love to continue to impact lives one performance at a time. It was my goal to pay homage to August Wilson and that would be the sole purpose for further productions. I wouldn't try in anyway to benefit off of future productions. If given the opportunity to do it again, I would work on further developing my Marie character. She was a huge hit in my show and served

as the mother figure in my script. Her personal story was never revealed and I would love to explore that further. I would also find a better connection to why Cliff sings “Sophisticated Lady.” The song could possibly reference Marie, but it needs to have purpose rather than being a beautiful song to sing. I would also work on my dance during the opening dreamscape scene. I had the opportunity to work with Sandra Parks and Nick Erickson and together we devised great movement work to showcase during this scene. However, after watching my performance I noticed what movements worked and those that didn’t. I would love to change it up so that it ties into not only the character’s need, but also the lyrical poetic style of the accompanying song.

8.3 Effects on my Artistry

I’ve learned a few things about myself as an artist and theatre maker. First, never commit yourself to doing something unless you’re absolutely passionate about it and willing to invest your all into it. From the day I chose my subject matter to the curtain call of my last show, I gave my all and left my heart on the floor. This show meant so much to me and although I felt like giving up at times, I knew that I couldn’t because the show had a greater purpose. The experience in return was extremely gratifying because I was in complete service to executing my passion and impacting my audience. This will be something that I will continue to take with me not only as an artist and theatre maker, but also in life period. Second, I learned to not take on projects unless you have the time to do it and the finances to produce it. Time and money was not on my side during my rehearsal process, and as a result several ideas got scratched. In the future I will make sure that I save enough money and give myself more than enough time to follow through and explore all of my creative ideas. Lastly, I learned that all action on stage must connect to the characters

need and your own personal need. This was a Meisner principle that I learned from Stacey Cabaj, Associate Head: M.F.A. Acting/ Assistant Professor of Voice. I understood this principle and used it for my acting work, but I didn't use it during my song selections until a week before my show opened. Although I was short on time, I was able to successfully find a personal connection to the songs, which aided in the storytelling of my piece. I will definitely apply this in the future whether it's for musical theatre class or professional opportunities.

References

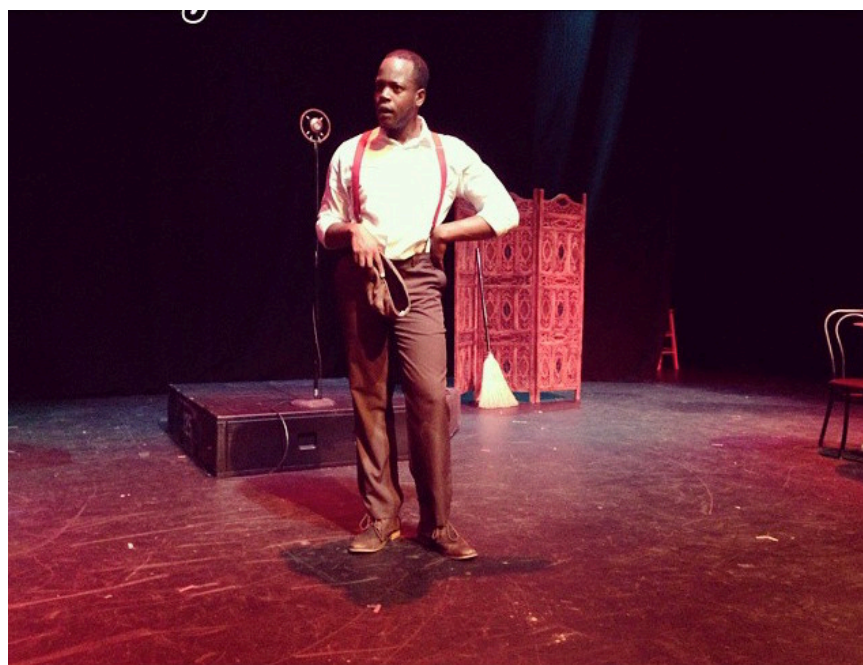
- Armstrong, Louis. *The Okeh, Columbia & RCA Victor Recordings - 1925-1933*. Sony Music Entertainment, 2012. CD.
- Lyons, Bonnie, George Plimpton. (Winter 1999). "August Wilson, The Art of Theater No. 14". *The Paris Review*.
- Fitzgerald, Ella, Louis Armstrong, Oscar Peterson, Herb Ellis, Ray Brown, Buddy Rich, Louis Bellson, and Russell Garcia. *Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong*. Verve, 1988. CD.
- Hagen, Uta. "The Exercises." *A Challenge for the Actor*. New York: Scribner's ;, 1991. 134. Print.
- Hines, Gregory, Judith Jamison, Mercer Ellington, and Duke Ellington. *Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies Original Broadway Cast Recording*. RCA Red Seal, 1981. CD.
- Hughes, Langston. *Poetry for Young People Langston Hughes*. New York: Sterling, 2006. 44. Print.
- Isherwood, Charles. "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, Is Dead at 60." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 2 Oct. 2005. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.
- Jacobus, Lee A. "August Wilson." *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford, 1997. 1559-1588. Print.
- Mark, Zane, George C. Wolfe, Daryl Waters, B. J. Crosby, Esther, and David St. Louis. *George C. Wolfe's Harlem Song Original Apollo Theater Cast Recording*. Columbia Records, 2002. CD.
- Oppenheim, Mike. "The Harlem Renaissance and American Music." *All About Jazz*. 3 Mar. 2013. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.
- Pirooz, Jordin. "Slang of the Harlem Renaissance." *The Harlem Renaissance*. 1 Dec. 2012. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.
- Wilson, August. *Jitney*. Woodstock, NewYork: Overlook, 2001. Print.
- Wilson, August. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Play in Two Acts*. New York: New American Library, 1985. Print.
- Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Plume, 1990. Print.

Appendices

Appendix A.1: Archival Production Weblink

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-nAMZ99400>

Appendix A.2: Archival Production Photos



Vita

Christopher “Amar Atkins” Atkinson is a native of Atlanta, Georgia. He is the proud son of Denise and Benjy Atkinson who instilled in him at a young age the importance of being tenacious, humble, and passionate in everything that he puts his heart into. He earned his Bachelors of Acting from Albany State University in 2012. While at Albany State University he was blessed to impact not only the Albany community, but people nationally and internationally.

He was afforded the opportunity to serve as Mr. Albany State University 2011-2012, was the National President for the National Association for Dramatic and Speech Arts, founded the Young Actors Mentoring Program through Alpha Psi Omega National Theatre Honors Society, and helped have a well built in Sudan, Africa through Save Lives Initiative, a program he founded. He was also a KCACTF nominee twice and won a plethora of acting, singing, and service awards and accolades.

He enrolled in LSU’s MFA (Professional Acting Training Program) in 2013 in aims of connecting to a place of deep personal meaning in his work, solidify proper acting techniques to use at his expense, to enrich his singing and dancing skills, to gain experience working with a professional equity theatre, and to further teaching skills that were obtained from previous undergraduate and community educational outreach programs. While at LSU, he starred in several Swine Palace productions including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Clybourne Park*, *Frankenstein*, *The School For Lies*, and *Spill*. He also had the opportunity to work with New Venture Theatre and star in their production of *Duke Ellington’s Sophisticated Ladies*. His plans after graduation are to move to New York or Atlanta and work in film, television, and musical theatre.