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Achieving the dream: An actor's journey and creative process of writing and performing a solo performance based upon the life of novelist and civil rights activist, James Baldwin.

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Achieving the Dream:
An Actor's Journey and Creative Process of
Writing and Performing a Solo Performance Based Upon
The Life of Novelist and Civil Rights Activist,
James Baldwin



Rodney A. Creech

Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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in
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ABSTRACT

Achieving the Dream:
An Actor's Journey and Creative Process of
Writing and Performing a Solo Performance Based Upon
The Life of Novelist and Civil Rights Activist,
James Baldwin

By Rodney A. Creech

This document explores the creative process involved in the development and writing of the one-man performance, focusing on the life and writings of essayist, novelist, playwright, and poet James Baldwin. This documentation will also cover research, journal excerpts, rehearsal, performance and self-evaluation of this thesis project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

James Baldwin, for his remarkable legacy and voice; I remember reading my first novel by James Baldwin at the age of fourteen and feeling a sense of incredible enlightenment. From that day on, I was inspired to read more of Baldwin's work. So, I must sincerely give thanks to James Baldwin for inspiring me to read and explore the world through the eyes of a great writer.

Pat and Hank Haskell, my guardian Angels and loyal friends, for your continual support, financially, spiritually and artistically, since we first became friends through the South Carolina Repertory Theatre Company so many years ago. I would not be the artist I am today if not for your unfaltering guidance and genuine concern for my future in the world of theatre. None of this would have been possible if you had not taken me under your wing and given your all to help me turn my life around. God bless you both.

Professor Phillip Beck, my director and acting professor here at West Virginia University, who helped me achieve the dream. Your patience and artistic vision was pivotal in this process and I could not have done it without you. Phillip and I began this journey facing the venture of creating an original work, utilizing the incredible life and writings of James Baldwin, my hero. We became the dynamic duo entering the world of Baldwin, sharing the vision and stepping into the unknown. I cannot thank you enough for all your help in this endeavor.

Walter Dallas, my mentor and friend, who presented me with the rare opportunity and wonderful pleasure of meeting James Baldwin in person. Without your incredible experience in the theatre community this meeting would not have been possible. Your sound advice and instruction during my training at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia played a major role in my acting achievements to this day.

Professor Theresa Davis, my colleague, friend and former professor at West Virginia University, who inspired me to push through the difficult moments in this process, and who led me to believe that James Baldwin's voice must be and shall be heard. You helped me to stay focused and taught me to trust in my own unique abilities as a performing artist, and for this encouragement, I am truly grateful.

Professor Jessica Morgan Bishop and Lee Blair, for agreeing to work on my thesis committee, and whose sound advice and support have been a continual guidance to me. My design team; Sabrina Hykes, Karen Muller, Aaron Dewitt and JW Walton, thank you all for your sound creative abilities and commitment throughout this process. Professor Heather Ahern, for choreography, and my technical team, Ben Jones and Taylor Ferrera, for helping to make this performance a success.

Special thanks to Joshua Williamson, Carol Kurcaba and Laura Hitt, and all my professors here at West Virginia University for helping me work out the necessary details

and for all your support; Frank Gagliano and Ethel Morgan Smith, who were pivotal in helping me write the script. Denice Burbach, my roommate for supporting me during this process. My family and friends and all those whom I've failed to mention here. I have been blessed with a circle of friends and supporters during this endeavor and through this network I am very pleased with the results of this performance.

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PREFACE



“Finding our inner identity. Changing ourselves. Realizing and integrating our life experience. Seeing life freshly and with new insight into others. Becoming aware of the powers of the mind. Risking and commitment. Extending our sense of who we are, and achieving liberation from restricted concepts of what a person is.”

—Brian Bates, *The Way of the Actor*

I began my journey at West Virginia University in August 2005 with hopes and aspirations to achieve a higher degree of knowledge and understanding of my craft as a performing artist. My background in theatre spans three decades from the age of fifteen when I directed my first production until today with a level of maturity as an actor, teacher and an insatiable thirst and curiosity for more knowledge. I didn't know what to expect when I first arrived on campus at West Virginia University, but I knew that I wanted to become a more compelling and believable actor on stage. This awareness led me to the realization that acting is a layering of many techniques and disciplines such as Constantine Stanislavski and Uta Hagen, focusing on the body, mind, and persona of the actor. I also discovered after my second year of training in this program, that as a black artist, I would face other unique challenges and obstacles in my study within this institution.

After four very rewarding and productive years at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA studying under my friend and colleague Walter Dallas, I returned to my

home in Savannah, GA, where I established my own theatre company, The East Side Players, a company dedicated to the performance of African-American theatre. With the help of many supporters, white and black, and grant money from Savannah's Department of Cultural Affairs, we performed in venues and neighborhood centers in the surrounding area focusing on the expansion of knowledge and performance of Black Theatre throughout the community. It was during this time that I realized how important this outreach program would become to me as a black performing artist, as I utilized my talents in educating potential audiences about the significance of black theatre and playwrights in this country.

I read my first novel by James Baldwin at the age of fourteen, the year before I saw the incredible production of *The Wiz* on Broadway, and subsequently the year before I directed my first play. The novel was entitled *Another Country* and Baldwin's work has inspired me from that day forward. In the year 1986 I experienced the incredible and rare opportunity of meeting James Baldwin in Philadelphia during a reading of his recent play *The Welcome Table*. In my opinion, James Baldwin is a prophet and legend of his own time, and his work continues to influence me in my search for truth as a black artist and fulfillment as a black American.

After auditioning at the University/Regional Theatre Association in New York City and upon my acceptance into this program, I searched for material to motivate me emotionally and intellectually. I immediately developed an appreciation for the works of William Shakespeare and other classical playwrights, experiencing a greater understanding concerning their work. I performed and created roles in such plays as; the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Trinculo in *The Tempest*, and Gayef in *The Cherry*

Orchard, but sensed a void as a black artist in a program made up of predominately white students. Coming from a background of primarily black productions, I wanted to acquire more knowledge concerning a universal approach to theatre in my training in this program, and how I would utilize this training as a black actor. James Baldwin's poetry provided me with the stimulus to explore other possibilities and motivation in this institution, discovering many different facets of my training and present goals.



Fig. 1. Rodney Creech as James Baldwin (Walton).

INSPIRING THE VISION



Fig. 2. James Baldwin Drawing (Belleville).

During my undergraduate study at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, I was introduced to a small volume of poetry entitled *Jimmy's Blues*. This book inspired me to learn more about Baldwin's plight as a black activist and pioneer during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and how his work helped initiate a change in our current situation in America today. Written only a few years before James Baldwin's death in 1987, Andy Carpenter quotes in the book cover of *Jimmy's Blues* that these selected poems are "...sometimes quiet and reflective, sometimes humorous; sometimes about love, sometimes about hate; often bitter or violent, they echo many of the themes of his novels and essays."

I became totally enthralled with selections such as: *Song (for Skip)*, *Some days (for Paula)* and *Christmas Carol*. When I first read *Some days (for Paula)*, I was compelled to set Baldwin's verse to music. I developed this song for a play I was working on entitled *Young Martin*, a one-man performance focusing on the early life and struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. I also committed to memory the poem *Song (for*

Skip), using it as a sermon in the same production. So, very early on after discovering *Jimmy's Blues*, I was motivated to commit these words to memory and perform these powerful poems. Baldwin's poetry spoke to me, exploring his religious and political views by utilizing the devices of lyrical story telling. As a black American sharing these revelations and striving to overcome discrimination, I became vigorous in my attempt to study these words and know them intimately and personally.

As a Graduate Acting student here at West Virginia University, our voice and speech professor asked us to bring in some poetry that we felt passionate about. I immediately considered James Baldwin's poetry from *Jimmy's Blues*. As I reminisced on the poems, the connection I felt before came back to me with a new awareness. My instructor encouraged me to continue to explore these poems because she recognized my enthusiasm and appreciation for Baldwin's verse.

Also during my Graduate studies, I began to examine how to become compelling and truthful onstage so I decided to focus on *Jimmy's Blues* for my thesis. I did not feel any real association to any of the roles offered to me in our Main Stage season. As an actor, I wanted to concentrate on material that engaged me personally. My professors in the College of Creative Arts Division of Theatre and Dance were supportive of this endeavor and allowed me a semester off from the Main Stage to create my own thesis performance. James Baldwin's verse from *Jimmy's Blues* spoke to me, and I set out on the journey of developing these inspirational poems into a script. The project focused on Baldwin's legacy as an author and activist during the twentieth century.

JIMMIE'S VOICE



Fig. 3. James Baldwin (Weissman).

Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the illegitimate son of a domestic worker from the South. He never knew his real father, and in his first successful novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, he reflects on the life of his birth father as a young man. His father was tormented by segregation and unfair treatment in Harlem that led to his self-destruction. Baldwin's mother and his profoundly religious stepfather, who was often cruel and abusive, raised him.

James Baldwin's writings are deeply influenced by the Harlem streets and growing up as a young black man tormented by race relations in America during the 1960s. He recalls being mistreated because of his skin color by police, employers, public restaurant workers and his peers of Caucasian descent. Baldwin was angry and felt he was just as intelligent and worthy of equal rights and opportunity as any man. This anger motivated him to write about his deep-rooted animosity towards America. In his novel, *The Fire Next Time*, he explores this anger concerning racial inequality as well as his belief in the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. He believed that love among all people breaks the barriers of separatism and hatred in the world and love is our only hope. He

also realized as a young man the difficulty in attaining love among all men in this country because of the deep-rooted hatred between black men and white men.

Richard Wright, another young black American author of powerful and sometimes controversial novels, inspired Baldwin to continue to explore his voice and became a significant source of support to him. Through their friendship, Richard Wright encouraged Baldwin to apply for a writing fellowship, and he attained the Eugene F. Saxon Memorial Award and left the United States in 1948 to pursue his writing in Paris, France. Baldwin felt a sense of freedom once in France, and although he didn't speak the language, he was safe from the torments of segregation and racism in America. He flourished as a writer in Paris and completed some of his most successful works there.

Baldwin returned to the United States in 1958 and began writing essays and novels speaking directly to the racial issues he faced in this country. These racial atrocities deeply influenced his writing and shaped his path as an activist and leader struggling to overcome inequality. He wrote plays and essays focusing on the issues of racial relations in America such as *Notes of a Native Son*, *Blues for Mister Charley*, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, *Everybody's Protest Novel*, *The Fire Next Time* and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. Baldwin's writing proved to be a great contribution in the fight for racial equality in America. However, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X caused him a great deal of pain. Through this anguish, he came to the realization that anger and hatred was the root of evil in this country. He explored in his writings the possibilities of a peaceful, nonviolent protest. In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin writes, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

James Baldwin's words became one of the fundamental influences in the civil rights movement in the United States of America. His voice resounds even to this day the call for freedom and equality for all generations.

Baldwin also wrote captivating fictional stories concerning tales of people and places reflecting his life. Topics of religion, homosexuality and race relations in America often play a major role in his novels. Once again, his perspective is explored in these narratives and how society imposes its stereotypical assumptions concerning these issues. Baldwin's voice inspired me in the process of creating this performance and continues to inspire me today.

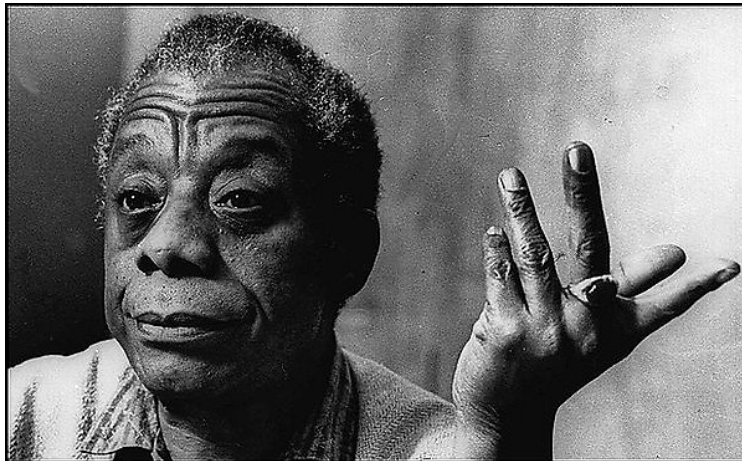


Fig. 4. James Baldwin

CAPTURING THE STORY



Fig. 5. Rodney Creech as James Baldwin (Walton).

After exploring James Baldwin's life and profound words, I set out to create a script about his life and influence as an artist. After many months of struggling with a scenario for the play, I found myself focusing on Baldwin's young life as a writer in Harlem. The Harlem Renaissance period refers to the flourishing of African-American literature, art, and drama during the 1920s and 1930s. I began researching the people who were influential during this era: Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay. These artists inspired the New Negro movement that became a celebration of Black culture in American society. This period also brought about the Harlem Rent Parties, and these Rent Parties were created to help struggling Black artists pay their exorbitant rents at the end of each month. I decided to entitle the script, *The Harlem Social Whist Party*, focusing on the rent parties and the card game they often played in which points are scored according to the number of tricks they won. This title would however change during the course of rehearsal.

James Baldwin was very young during the Harlem Renaissance era, but I decided to utilize this theme as the focal point of the script. The play would begin with Baldwin himself preparing for his own Rent Party, dealing with his guests and ultimately other figures in his life. In the early stages of the writing process, I came across a website where Baldwin presented lectures to the students at the University of California Berkeley in Berkeley, California. These lectures were fascinating to me and captured James Baldwin's voice and legacy. He explained his purpose as a writer in bringing about the necessary change in our society concerning the issues of race relations and education. I decided to implement some of his speeches in the dialogue of the play starting out in 1979 at Berkeley with Baldwin, age 55, giving his lecture to the students. Baldwin was also an avid music lover so I decided to use music from the 1930s such as Fats Waller and Bessie Smith.

I utilized the poems from *Jimmy's Blues* that inspired me emotionally and that dealt with the issues of racism and religion. These poems spoke to me as an artist and admirer of James Baldwin's work: *Some days (for Paula)*, (which I had already set to music), *Christmas carol*, *Song (for Skip)*, *Confessions*, and *Death is easy (for Jefe)*, (which came to me later in the rehearsal process). These poems would guide me in writing the script as I told the story of Baldwin's life growing up in Harlem.

The story would unfold with Baldwin reminiscing about the Harlem Renaissance and the people who were influential in his life. Baldwin would welcome the audience into the world of the play and the Harlem Whist Party, and then focus on his purpose as a writer and advocate in the struggles of racism in America.

Baldwin's stepfather would play a major role in the story as a pivotal character that provoked a crucial change in his life. His stepfather was extremely religious and uptight concerning the issues of race relations for a young man growing up in Harlem, and believed a young black boy couldn't experience the same opportunities as a white boy. Baldwin broke away from these conventions placed upon him, and struggled to prove to himself and to his stepfather that he was worthy of the same treatment and education as any white person. The story would then focus on Baldwin's religious influences, also provoked by his stepfather, to become a Pentecostal minister at the age of fifteen and how this influenced his voice as a writer.

The play would proceed with Baldwin as a young man moving to New Jersey to work in a factory, and how he came face-to-face with the blatant elements of racism in this country. He was refused patronage in a white-owned restaurant and reacted in defiance to this predicament. Baldwin then had the good fortune of meeting Richard Wright who encouraged him to leave America to search for refuge in another country where he could pursue his writing. Baldwin then established himself as a writer in Paris, France, but yearned for his own country. He realized his love for the English language and the American people. As Baldwin states in his lecture at Berkeley:

For this village brings home this fact: there was a day, and not a very distant day, when Americans were scarcely Americans at all but discontented Europeans, facing a great unconquered continent and strolling into a marketplace, seeing black men for the first time. I dropped into a silence, in which I heard, for the first time...really heard...and began to be able to try to deal with the beat of the language of the people who had produced me. America.

In conclusion of the story, James Baldwin would return to America and realize his purpose in combating the issues of racism in his essays and novels. He would discover once again that love and compassion towards our fellow men would ultimately end the racial nightmare and change the history of the world.

THE RESEARCH

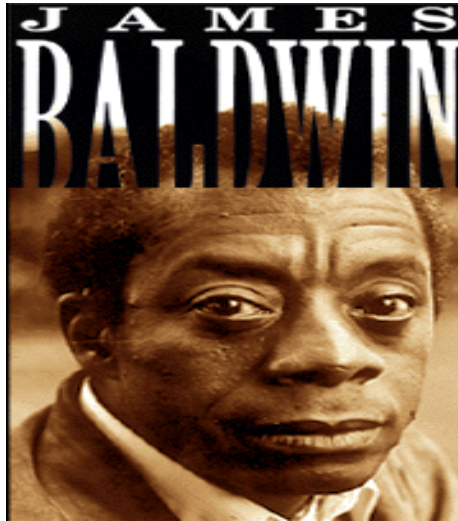


Fig. 6. James Baldwin

After deciding on a structure for the story, I began my research into James Baldwin's history and events that were significant to the plot. Baldwin wrote about his childhood and other major events in his life in the autobiographical novel, *Notes of a Native Son*. Informative websites such as Wikipedia and online media for the Berkeley University lectures were also useful in this process. I also found references to the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s and 1930s in web archives.

The Price of the Ticket and *The Fire Next Time*, media resource and novel by James Baldwin also proved to be beneficial in my research of Baldwin's legacy. A famous quote by James Baldwin from *The Fire Next time* spoke to me concerning Baldwin's motivation during the civil rights movement in America:

If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!

I also discovered a very informative biography of James Baldwin's life by Lisa Rosset entitled *James Baldwin* that was helpful in exploring the people and influences in his life growing up in Harlem.

During the summer of 2007, I visited Harlem in New York City and the neighborhood where James Baldwin grew up. My visit to Harlem was enlightening to me in exploring Baldwin's environment and how this influenced his writing. Harlem is primarily a black community supporting black-owned establishments such as bookstores, restaurants and other franchises. The neighborhoods are overcome with poverty, but there is a strong sense of integrity among the people. I found that Harlem possesses an energy that overshadows the dilapidated buildings and living conditions, and there is a genuine feeling of brotherhood and mutual support among the residents.

The research into Baldwin's legacy was very rewarding to me. I discovered facets of Baldwin's background that informed me about his struggles to become the writer he was ultimately destined to become. His work establishes his political opinions as well as his accomplishments as a Black American.

HOW THE SCRIPT EVOLVED



Fig. 7. Rodney Creech as Wallace Thurman (Walton).

During the rehearsal process, I was very fortunate to acquire the skills of Professor Phillip Beck as director for the production. As we delved into the world of creating this piece, the script evolved leading up to the final draft. Phillip and I discovered the stories' main focus would not only center on the Harlem Renaissance period, but also explore Baldwin's voice as a civil rights activist, and how his influence would help change the conditions of race relations in America during the 1960s. By utilizing the poems from *Jimmy's Blues*, we continually turned the focus to Baldwin's legacy as a writer and how he was influenced by his life growing up in the Harlem ghettos.

Instead of starting out with the Harlem Whist Party, we decided to explore the possibilities of Baldwin himself welcoming the audience into the world of the play. He would begin at his typewriter working on the final draft of one of his novels. The audience would eventually play a major role in the production enabling me to break the

conventions of the 'Fourth Wall' and speak directly to the audience. Through this process, I explored the necessary elements of truth on stage. By examining the methods of Uta Hagen and her 'Fourth Wall' exercises, I discovered the elements of utilizing the environment of the play by engaging the audience as a major part of the theatrical experience.

Phillip wanted to add the dimension of multiple characters in the play; as well as Baldwin, I would play the people who were influential to him as an aspiring artist. His stepfather would play a major role focusing on his influences concerning religion and his abusive behavior towards Baldwin as a young child. A young street thug and police officer in Harlem would show the negative influences in Baldwin's life and how he learned to overcome them and survive. Wallace Thurman would eventually become a main character in the play as we focused on the Harlem Rent Party, and the rambunctious enthusiasm of the people who attended the party such as Sammy Boy, Shirley (Sammy's girlfriend), Mr. Weisman (Wally's Jewish landlord), and Harold Friedman (a friendly young white liberal). Other characters like a racist young white waitress in New Jersey, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Martin Luther King Jr. would also eventually help to establish Baldwin's world in the play.

I found myself open to the changes Phillip and I discovered during the course of the rehearsal process, and the script continued to evolve right up to the final weeks before production. In the ending stages of the writing process, the title of the play would change to *Jimmie's Blues* focusing on Baldwin's journey as a writer growing up in the ghettos of Harlem and the people who were influential in his legacy.

THE REHEARSAL PROCESS



Fig. 8. Rodney Creech as Harlem Street Thug (Walton).

I completed my first draft of the script in the summer of 2007, and Phillip and I began the rehearsal process during the fall semester of the same year. Once again, I cannot emphasize enough what a pivotal role Professor Beck played in the creation of this performance. His sound advice and expertise as a director helped me to explore the wonderful possibilities in creating this performance. We started out working on the first draft and putting the play on its feet, and we continued to discover many phases in rehearsal that enlightened us on our journey.

Professor Beck asked me early on in the process to prepare an improvisational dialogue taking on the persona of James Baldwin in an interview about his life. This exercise was enlightening to me as a performing artist and I discovered Baldwin's physical presence and his voice. I found it relatively simple to take on the persona of James Baldwin, exploring the deep resonance of his vocal quality that is similar to my own. As a young child, Baldwin's vocal quality would take on a higher pitch and sound.

Also during the course of the action in the play, I discovered a crescendo in Baldwin's voice comparable to a Baptist preacher. In the script, Baldwin acknowledges that he became a Pentecostal preacher at the age of fifteen so this intense vocal quality was appropriate in my portrayal of him.

Baldwin's character would also take on his own unique physicality in the play as we went through different stages in the course of the rehearsal process. Introducing him as a young writer diligently seeking his mission and purpose as an artist. I discovered his physical presence to be fluid with a slightly feminine quality. Baldwin was a homosexual who took no pleasure in flaunting the fact that he was gay but wasn't ashamed of it either. I discovered early on in the process a soft, gentle quality in his movement. His center would be focused in the lower portions of the body, moving his hands and gestures in a distinctive style. His physicality is very different from my own, so I explored light, sustained movement. After viewing *The Price of the Ticket*, an autobiographical documentary on Baldwin, I discovered his unique physical presence early on in rehearsal. Meeting James Baldwin in Philadelphia, PA in 1986 was also a tremendous help to me as I recalled his physical posture and vocal quality. James Baldwin was very ill when I met him, but his physical presence was stoically engaging.

After the first few weeks of rehearsal, Phillip and I discovered that Baldwin communicating with imaginary characters on stage took away from the action of the play. We decided to implement the first changes in the script by actually having Baldwin himself take on the persona of the different characters who were influential in telling the story. This enabled me as the performer to become more active in the course of the performance. We would eventually discover many different characters that played a

pivotal role in Baldwin's development as a writer. The Harlem Street Thug who influenced young Baldwin to aspire to achieve success and avoid a life of poverty and crime became my initial challenge. I discovered a lethargic, sluggish physicality for the Street thug who is obviously intoxicated and spaced out. I focused his physical center in the lower half of my body exploring indirect, quick movement and concentrating on an unstable physical posture. The Harlem police officer's movement I discovered would be centered in the upper body, focusing on direct, strong movement with an air of arrogance and aggressiveness. I found it challenging to capture a Brooklyn accent for the police officer and also develop a different vocal sound. Professor Laura Hitt, our voice and speech instructor was very helpful to me in this process helping me to concentrate on different sound changes and pitch. Baldwin's stepfather took on a commanding physical stature, concentrating on strong, sustained movement. The stepfather's center would be located in his upper chest using a substantial amount of hand gestures. His voice took on a boisterous quality resembling the style of a Pentecostal preacher.

The other voices and characters in the play were also challenging and rewarding to me as an actor: Mr. Weisman, the elderly white Jewish landlord who slouched from the waist and spoke with his hands; Wallace Thurman, a flamboyant writer who enjoyed a good party, dancing in the style of the 1930s jitterbug and strut moving with freedom and extensive hand gestures; Shirley, an over weight, outspoken party guest who danced and sashayed with her hips; Sammy-Boy, Shirley's boyfriend who became grouchy and short-tempered moving with a rigid posture; Harold Freidman, a white intellectual nerd who moved with awkward and tense expression; the white New Jersey waitress who took on a sarcastic, bigoted persona with wide eyes and a disagreeable attitude; the white New

Jersey restaurant patron, who became a belligerent bigot physically aggressive and violent; Richard Wright, intelligent and conventional who spoke in a proper tone and physically upright, and Martin Luther King Jr., an eloquent speaker and minister who moved his hearers with his physical presence utilizing his hands and voice in expressing his heartfelt sermons. All of the characters became authentic in their own unique presence in the course of the rehearsal process.

Phillip also came up with the idea of underscoring the poetry from *Jimmie's Blues* with the sounds of Jazz by Miles Davis. Davis's sultry jazz along with other musical underscoring of blues and gospel by recording artist such as Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, Edith Piaf and The Moses Hogan Singers helped to set the mood and environment for the play. The music played a major role in helping me establish Baldwin's journey in the story. We then consulted Professor Heather Ahern, Director of Dance for the Division, to help create choreography of the period for the Harlem Renaissance party sequence.

Through the efforts of outside sources and perceptive direction by Professor Beck, the production continued to evolve and flourish until the final stages of the performance.

THE JOURNAL



Fig. 9. James Baldwin

I kept a journal during the rehearsal process that helped me learn more about my craft as an actor in the development of this thesis performance and to explore the journey of creating an original script. Each entry is a discovery of the different phases of the process and how the performance evolved. The following are just a few of the entries that I found interesting in this exploration:

Entry 1: September 28th 2007

I read my first James Baldwin novel when I was 14 years old, *Another Country*. This book spoke to me in a poetic language and style, which left me craving more. At 15, I decided I wanted to explore the world of theatre and was introduced to Baldwin's play, *The Amen Corner*, which also inspired me.

—Later I read, *Giovanni's Room*, a story about two gay lovers in Italy. I tried to read everything I could by James Baldwin not realizing how many novels, plays, and essays I had overlooked in the course of my search.

—In 1986, I had the incredible experience of meeting James Baldwin during my undergraduate career in Philadelphia, PA. At this time, I was introduced to a small book of poetry entitled, *Jimmy's Blues*. These poems spoke to me on so many different levels; spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and they inspired me to dream of performing these words in some way. I had a strong desire to share them with those people who hadn't experienced these poetic prophecies by a legendary artist like James Baldwin.

Entry 2: September 29th 2007.

Professor Phillip Beck has been a tremendous help in the process of drafting a workable script, and he also agreed to direct the performance.

—On September 13th, 2007, under the guidance of Professor Phillip Beck, we met with two spectators, Denice Burbach and Nathan Crocker, and performed an improvisation centering on an interview with James Baldwin, played by myself, and a question-and-answer session involving his life and career. The improvisation was very informative, and helped us in the process of yet another draft of the script.

—I have been working on draft IV of the play as of September 21st, 2007 and continue to seek advice and the help of Professor Phillip Beck and other colleagues.

Entry 3: October 1st, 2007, Monday 4:00PM (VDM)

I met with Professor Beck to do a first reading of the fourth draft of the play. My concern is that the script seemed too contrived and I wanted it to become more active. In these re-writes, I wrote in several different characters in James Baldwin's life, hoping these characters would help the play achieve more of an active approach.

—During the reading, I noticed the script seemed too choppy, and the transitions weren't quite clear. Professor Beck and I decided to re-work the material so we could center the

entire performance on the Social Whist Party and the different characters that enter the story of James Baldwin's life. The main question is how do we achieve love and respect among all people in this country?

Entry 4: October 4th, 2007, Monday 4:00PM (SLAB)

Rehearsal today proved to be very beneficial in the process and to the road of discovery for the production. Working with Professor Beck, we made discoveries concerning the environment and the structure of the piece. I discovered tools for making the performance and reenactment of James Baldwin's life in the realm of this world of the Harlem Social Party. Speaking to the individual people on stage is enlightening in making the piece active and non-presentational.

Entry 6: October 9th, 2007, Monday (Large Make-up Room)

I'm feeling very disconnected to the process right now. I'm discovering what I wrote on paper, concerning the script, is not what the actual production is turning out to be. It's very difficult to bring this show to life for me right now but I try to remain hopeful.

—I feel my director is asking all the right questions to make this piece coherent but I just don't feel like I have all the right answers right now.

—I received a message on You Tube from another James Baldwin fan today. I expressed my concerns to him about this rehearsal process and he related a very enlightening message to me. James Baldwin is a true prophet and any voice speaking his prophetic messages need to be heard. I stopped worrying about the process and concentrated on the subject matter.

Entry 11: October 17th, 2007 (SLAB)

We completed blocking the entire play this evening and I find myself satisfied with the first part and ending of the performance. This endeavor is very challenging for me but I know it will also be rewarding. Professor Beck suggested that I become more self indulgent in the lyrical style of James Baldwin's words. Also, I need to devote time to developing the different voices and speech patterns.

Entry 15: November 1st, 2007

Professor Beck and I met during the course of this week to discuss our present standing with the performance, and we realized that the script presented flaws in the sequence of events in the play. We kept coming back to the party that caused the performance to be static and choppy. I decided to go back to the writing table, and like James Baldwin, I had to ask myself what I wanted to really address in the performance. After deciding that the party was presenting the major problems, I decided to go another route. Also, we felt that I could actually rework multiple characters in the course of events.

Entry 16: November 6th, 2007, (Large Make-up Room)

Tonight's rehearsal was very successful. All of the movement and character changes seem to fall in place now, and this piece is very challenging to me as a performing artist. —We spoke with the chair of the dance faculty here, Professor Heather Ahern, to come in on Friday to help choreograph the Harlem Whist Party sequence. Meanwhile I'm working diligently on memorizing the new text.

—Professor Beck is great, and actually on his feet now, creating movement and emotional content that helps the play move, as well as making it personal.

REALIZING THE DREAM



Fig. 10. Professor Phillip Beck and Rodney Creech (Walton).

Jimmie's Blues was performed on December 7th and 9th, 2007, in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the Creative Arts Center of West Virginia University in dedication to the legacy and memory of James Baldwin. Through the efforts of my production team, Professor Phillip Beck (Director), Sabrina Hykes (Set Design), Karen Muller (Light Design), Aaron Dewitt (Costume Design), JW Walton (Sound Design), Ben Jones (Sound Operator), Taylor Ferrera (Light Board Operator) and Professor Heather Ahern (Choreography), we played to wonderful audiences of fellow students and colleagues. The performance focused on the life and times of poet, novelist, and essayist James Baldwin who died twenty years prior to the performance on December 1st, 1987. His work remains contemporary, and inspires readers even in today's society. The reason for this is that America's racial problems have changed so little over the generations. Baldwin's writing addresses the real question of race relations, and this play explored his youth and accomplishments during the struggles for racial equality in the United States of America.

The production was well received and we organized a talk back during the final performance of the play. During the talk back, audience members expressed an appreciation for the play and wanted to know more about James Baldwin. I was surprised to learn how many people were unfamiliar with James Baldwin's writings and who he was but there were also audience members in attendance who were avid admirers of his work. The audience thanked me for creating a play focusing on James Baldwin's legacy and inquired about my plans for future performances. *Jimmie's Blues* was very successful and we received standing ovations from the audience after both performances.

In the following quote by Kai Wright, editor of BlackAIDS.org, he explores the plight of James Baldwin's community in Harlem:

So today, Baldwin's Harlem lingers atop the list of New York neighborhoods with problems ranging from dilapidated stock to communicable disease to food establishments that simply fail to pass health inspection. The same is true for racially defined ghettos around the country.

SELF ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION



Fig. 11. Rodney Creech as James Baldwin (Walton).

In my work in developing an original script, I discovered the possibility of living in Baldwin's world and playing an action without commenting on who he was by allowing myself to take on the persona of James Baldwin and sharing this experience with the audience. I discovered my strengths as well as my challenges in creating this role.

During my education as a Graduate Theatre student at West Virginia University, I've undergone a major transition in my training as a performing artist. I discovered an honesty and truth as an actor on stage. In creating an original monodrama, I've learned to overcome my weakness in becoming presentational with creating a character, primarily working from the physical aspects of a role, and appreciate my strengths in engaging the audience. In the past three years as a Graduate student, I've recognized my own presence as an actor and how to express these qualities naturally without imposing a preconceived physicality and vocal quality that separates me from the truth of a performance. In my process, I usually start with an intellectual approach in creating a character instead of exploring the psychological journey. I began to ask myself what does the character want

in the play and how does he go about achieving his goals? I've learned to explore a character's environment and given circumstances, and how these circumstances affect me as the actor.

My work in class with Uta Hagen's method of acting helped me recognize a natural ability to settle into a believable approach in creating a character. I found myself attempting to force an emotional response from the audience without living in the moment. Where does the character begin his discoveries and how do the circumstances change his purpose in the play? Within the process of developing an original dialogue, I've learned to make discoveries without intellectualizing. The life of a character occurs from my own-shared experiences in creating a role.

Entering the world of academic theatre, I knew I would be faced with many challenges. Utilizing my talents in this program as a black artist, I realized I would be offered roles outside of my race. In the world of theatre, there are many compelling stories to be told. I consider it an honor to explore the works of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Brecht and other well-known authors, but found it challenging to adjust to roles written for characters with backgrounds unfamiliar to me. In my work in *Jimmie's Blues*, it was refreshing to step into the role of a fellow black artist. The American theatre usually offers minimal roles to black actors, and how we confront this reality informs us about who we are as performing artists.

It has been a true honor and rare privilege to create a one-man performance focusing on the legacy of James Baldwin. I hope this production has inspired people of all ages and races to explore the writings of this great author of the twentieth century. I would like to continue to allow the script to evolve and explore the possibilities of performing this

piece in other venues. My plans for future productions are to develop an out reach program to perform *Jimmie's Blues* in colleges and universities throughout the country. James Baldwin's legacy as a profound black artist should be experienced by future generations so that we continue to strive for equality among all people. I hope to play a major role in this effort, by following the quote from James Baldwin's lecture from UC Berkeley:

Love breaks all barriers of separatism and hatred through out this land.

—James Baldwin

Baldwin Lives!!!



Fig. 12. James Baldwin

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Fig. 2. Belleville, France. Wagonized Drawings. September 30, 2006.

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Fig. 7. Walton, JW. Jimmie's Blues Production Photos. Gladys G. Davis Theatre, West Virginia. 2007.

Fig. 8. Walton, JW. Jimmie's Blues Production Photos. Gladys G. Davis Theatre, West Virginia. 2007.

Fig. 9. Pop: Lock Life. Say Yes to life. James Baldwin. 2007.
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Fig. 10. Walton, JW. Jimmie's Blues Production Photos. Gladys G. Davis Theatre, West Virginia. 2007.

Fig. 11. Walton, J.W. Jimmie's Blues Production Photos. Gladys G. Davis Theatre, West Virginia. 2007.

Fig. 12. The Station North Arts Café Gallery. The National James Baldwin Literary Society, Inc. 2007. <<http://www.jamesbaldwin.org/page2.html>>.