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toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

Published on *Independent Reader* (<https://indyreader.org>)

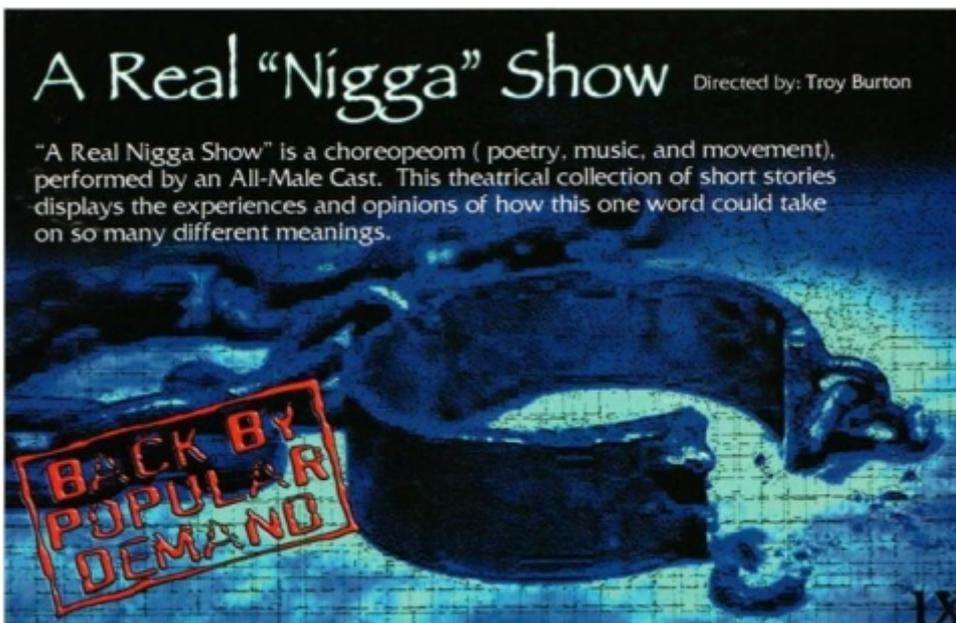
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A Real “Nigga” Show: A Black Man’s Review

Contributed by:

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Monday, August 19, 2013 - 00:00



On August 10, I had the distinct pleasure and opportunity to attend the 2013 production of *A Real "Nigga" Show* [2]—a choreopoem performed by an all black and male cast at the Baltimore Theatre Project. The show was powerfully performed and fearlessly articulated a critical vision of the current state of black manhood in contemporary American society. The skillful actors presented nuances and back-stories for a variety of characters that gave the audience insight into the circumstances that shaped their behaviors. They dramatized the rap group Dead Prez’ lyrics on their album *Let’s Get Free* by illustrating via vivid characters how: “my environment made me the nigga I am.”

The show was both entertaining as art and thought-provoking as social critique. The show offered the audience a penetrating look at what pop artist Michael Jackson referred to as “the man in the mirror.” In this case, the mirror was the way that the choreopoem displayed a critical yet empathetic reflection of the lives, experiences, and behaviors of black boys and men who live and grow up in America’s disinvested urban environments. In another sense, the theatrical production mirrored the multi-textured voices of many marginalized black men, perhaps in juxtaposition with Ntozake Shange’s fiery and powerful choreopoem *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is not enuf*. As such, *A Real "Nigga" Show* [2] provided a rare insight into the lives of a group of hyper-maligned, hyper-demonized, and mischaracterized black boys and

men, particularly those living in neighborhoods like Upton, Druid Heights, and Greenmount East.

While watching the show proved to be a thrilling and immersive experience, I will contend that the Charm City production's playwrights could have done a better job at the end of the show in two main ways. First, they could have attempted to articulate an emerging vision for a new black manhood. In the "Age of Obama," black manhood exists in a perilous state. Given the unrelentingly racist and racially tinged assault from the GOP-Tea Party, President Obama has often responded with an unremitting stream of compromising stances (i.e. renouncing Rev. Jeremiah Wright, hosting the infamous "beer summit", and dropping Shirley Sherrod at the first sign of Fox trouble). When a black man as brilliant as Barack Obama feels he needs to avoid any sign of anger because of the nation's racial landmines, then we know that black manhood is still circumscribed by white expectations that black men in leadership should "stay cool" in order to avoid being seen as the "angry black man."

Second, the local production's playwrights could have lifted up strategies that could be utilized to confront and defeat America's persistent attempts to niggerize black men as a whole. As described by noted philosopher and liberation theologian Cornel West:



When you're niggerized, you're unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, hated for who you are. You become so scared that you defer to the powers that be and you're willing to consent to your own domination. And that's the history of black people in America.

And along with that history, is the manner by which some black boys and men internalize and adopt the stereotypical images and media projections that are consistent with white supremacist views of black men (and by extension black people) as soulless, animals, intellectually inferior, beasts of burden, jocular entertainers, or mindless athletes. The internalization of racism and racist imagery by some black males is as much of an issue as the racism and violence that white males have exacted against black boys and men throughout American history.[1]

Given the recent vigilante slayings of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Darius Simmons, given the disproportionate mass incarceration of millions of black boys and men, and given the nationwide practice of police brutality, differential arrests and unequal sentencing for the same crimes, and stop-and-frisk policies practiced by predominantly white cops against black boys and men, it is clear that black boys and men desperately need practical transformative strategies to overcome and reverse the niggerization process that America has imposed on black men since the first enslaved African was brought to these shores and continues through the present day (i.e. "breaking" slaves, whippings, racial terrorism, lynchings, convict leasing, race riots/mob murder, Jim Crow, COINTELPRO, Stand Your Ground, etc.).

One might argue that *A Real "Nigga" Show* [2] brilliantly exposed the pathologies inherent in the internalization of the word 'nigga'. To this, I would agree! The audience witnessed the damaging implications of what it means to define oneself as a nigga: illegal drug usage, mental instability, self-hatred, apathy/laziness, criminality and anti-social behaviors, unhealthy behaviors (especially in terms of smoking and nutrition), and a contentious relationship with black women. These depictions were illuminating, haunting, and affecting. Yet, I do think that more could have been done to highlight and present the political potential of what it would mean to reject all that being a nigga in American has come to represent.

Instead, the show ended with the declaration that they (the cast) were “new niggas”! I’m pretty sure that Nigga 1.0 software[2] needs to be deleted, but the playwrights never indicated what the features of Nigga 2.0 software would include. Because of this critical omission, the audience was left to wonder, would Nigga 2.0 software include:

- More criminality?
- Increased black advocacy and unity?
- More shootings by George Zimmerman 2.0?
- Or taking control of stereotypical and predatory media images, especially those we help perpetuate?

Again, the first 4/5ths of the show was devastatingly brilliant. But at the very end of the performance, the cast waived goodbye to the audience and said: “Goodbye niggas!” There was a certain gleefulness to their articulation and expression that raised more questions than it answered. Some of my friends who attended the show have argued that by portraying the pathologies associated with being a nigga, the playwrights had done enough. Their argument was that the playwrights did not need to create a political vision for how black men could overcome America’s ongoing niggerization process.

My response to that argument is that niggerization in American society is inherently political. “Niggers” are what black men were bred to be in America so that they/we wouldn’t pose much of a threat to the status quo (i.e. slavery, Jim Crow, the New Jim Crow or Jim Crow 2.0). We still perceived collectively as predatory threats to law and order. We cannot afford ambiguity and more of the same.

The playwrights achieved so much in terms of offering an incisive social critique and in didactically engaging the audience in the pathologies associated with being a nigga in America society. My hope is that in the next iteration of *A Real "Nigga" Show* [2], the playwrights would create a stronger ending that gives more thought to why the niggerization process was imposed on black people but especially black boys and men in the first place. My prayer is that they playwrights devote more of the end of the show toward how we can counteract and overcome niggerization’s perilous effects on and in the lives of black men, the black family, and ultimately our entire society. Ase [3]!

NOTES:

[1] These issues of racist imagery and internalization are covered and discussed brilliantly in Edward Blum’s book, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* [4] and M.K. Asante’s book, *It’s Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* [5].

[2] By software, I am drawing a certain analogy to computers. Our physical bodies, down to our genetic makeup, constitute human hardware. Different ethnic groups’ behaviors, beliefs, and identities along with shared histories, religions, and mythologies—in total, our cultures—constitute human software. Thus, if we understand that “being a nigga” is one specific culture with particular

dimensions, we can define what behaviors, beliefs, myths, and modes of identity constitute such a culture. From there, we can “reprogram” and redefine our “cultural software” so that we can socialize black boys to avoid the pathologies that accompany the internalization of niggerization in American society.

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Links:

[1] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/lawrence-brown>

[2] <http://www.theatreproject.org/shows/arealniggashow/>

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ase_%28Yoruba%29

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/American-Prophet-Politics-Culture-America/dp/0812220862>

[5] http://www.amazon.com/Its-Bigger-Than-Hip-Hop/dp/0312593023/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1376742489&sr=1-1&keywords=its+bigger+than+hip+hop