



The Weight of Being Black

by Camille R. Lofters

Adventist college alumni, students, and faculty write, perform, and produce a play at a famous off-off-Broadway theater.

When *The Weight of Being Black* premiered on December 1, 1992, at the Ira Aldridge Theatre at Howard University in Washington, D.C., it received a full minute-long standing ovation. Written and co-directed by a former student at Columbia Union College, Glen Alan, it was first performed by six young men enrolled at the college and produced by Rhondda Robinson, an assistant professor of communications and English at CUC.

Three months later *Weight* had an even greater triumph—two performances at the internationally renowned off-off-Broadway La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, 74A East 4th Street, New York City.

"Eighty percent of what is called the American theater came out of La MaMa," says Harvey Fierston, the actor and playwright who wrote the book on which the hit production *La Cage aux Folles* is based. One of the few black theater owners today, Ellen Stewart, founder, artistic director, "la mama" herself, was inducted into the Theater Hall

of Fame in January 1993.

The Weight of Being Black explores the problems, the fears, and the frustrations of being a black male in American society today. It is a series of dramatic poems, by no accident reminiscent of Ntozake Shange's production: *For Colored Girls* . . . What *For Colored Girls* did for the black female, *The Weight of Being Black* does for the black male.

The Weight takes the audience through seven aspects of the social ills that affect the black youth of today's American society, beginning with Act I, "Love," which delves into the African-American male/female relationship. While man is the power, the strength, woman is the goddess, the progenitor, the miracle of birth and of life—"Respect you?" begs one actor. "I don't know *how* . . . teach me."

In Act II, "Father and Son," the vicious and tragic cycle of teenage parenthood is painfully and poignantly illustrated. "I was fifteen when my girlfriend told me she was pregnant," says the father from one end of the stage. ". . . I

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heard she had a boy."

"My momma said that they called Jesus a bastard," says the son, from the other end. "I guess my father was like God—unseen."

". . . But I was always there when he needed me," the father protests.

"He was never there when I needed him," retorts the son.

Act III, "Disillusioned Warriors," deals with the very prevalent problem of violence and police brutality based on race—" . . . hiding behind a badge, under the street lights, in a neighborhood that did not invite them, looking for an excuse . . ." "Listen to their screams," cries a preacher in the third scene, "Eulogy"—the screams of the mothers whose sons have been gunned down for the sole crime of being dark and scared.

"Where have all the heroes gone?" is the message, the urgent question of Act IV. In "A Letter to Malcolm," a young man reluctantly, painfully acknowledges the fact that in truth, ". . . nothing has changed. . . ." Loath to believe, he poses the question—have our heroes died for nothing?

In a most stirring, most frightening act, the profound effect of drugs on the black community is addressed. "I'm gonna be just like Big Freddy," says one misguided little boy, whose hero worship has fallen on the head of a drug dealer whose motto is "those who live by the sword . . . survive by the sword." "He don't have to go to school or *nothing* . . . He just stands on the corner, and people walk up to him and *give* him money." In a truly sad example of faulty logic, the boy explains that he wants to become rich to get his mother out of the projects and off of drugs, so that he can go to school and ". . . get me some good peanut butter . . . the kind that don't come in a can, and don't tear up your bread."

The Weight also deals with an

issue that most non-minority individuals rarely think of or understand—the issue of stereotypes, unconscious prejudices. Why is it that they cross the street and clutch their purses tighter when they see him approach? wonders one young man. Is it his dress, or because "My enunciation undermines my pronunciation?" Maybe it's "my jeans . . ." he says, as slowly, his hand travels from the belt of his pants to the back of his hand. "My genes . . ."

The finale, "Rising Up," offers a glimpse of hope as the full cast entreats the "brothers" everywhere to "rise up," to rise above fear, above anger, racism, oppression, and hatred.

The booking of *The Weight* into a New York theater is a saga in itself. Robinson, the producer, decided to try for La MaMa. La MaMa was one of the first "non-mainline" theaters to support full-time resident companies, such as the American Indian Theater Ensemble and The Pan Asian Repertory, that have served as "American ambassadors of experimental culture in all corners of the world."

The atmosphere is dusky and mysterious. Black chairs and black-covered tables line the brick walls, creating an ambiance reminiscent of a 1920 jazz club. The small stage is close to the audience—close enough to touch, close enough for the action to engulf you. It is a place where stars are created.

"I mean, you've got veteran actors who are dying to play at La MaMa's," says actress Princess Wilson, who performed a one-woman play at CUC's convocation service on February 9, 1993. "To have that in the credits . . . 'has been performed at La MaMa's . . .'"

The standard procedure for booking a play is to mail in the script and wait for a reply. Robinson

and Alan the playwright called the office and were told that Stewart, the director, admired spontaneity. So, in November 1992, they traveled to New York's lower East Side, bringing in the script themselves.

"If we mailed it in," says Robinson, "it would get thrown on a pile with everything else. But if we brought it in ourselves, and especially if we got to talk to somebody, it had a better chance."

The associate director, Merryll Vladimer, gave them five minutes to present their case. "Glenn told her about the play, gave her a summary. . . . She told us to leave the script with her. She would read it and call us back in a week. We called *her* back the week before Thanksgiving, and she said . . . well, she said Yes," said Robinson.

Then the waiting began.

"We called to set a date. For six weeks we called . . . not every single week, but at first, once a week. [Vladimer] would be out or our calls wouldn't be returned. We sent her a Christmas card with a written sneak preview, a program from the Howard [University] production, and the review that was in the *Columbia Journal* enclosed."

But finally, on Monday night, February 8, 1993, five young men from CUC, members of the Dramatis Theatrical Ensemble, found themselves in New York at La MaMa's, performing Glenn Alan's *The Weight of Being Black*. The actors were Randolph Stafford, Randy Preston, Huan Mitchell, Joel Pergerson, and Dwayne Coutreyer.

The Weight went back to La MaMa's on February 22, 1993, when the theater sent out a special mailing to the public and critics.

Where does *The Weight* go from here? "[Hopefully,] we'll get to Broadway—maybe a nationwide tour, where we'll hit all the metropolitan areas," says Pergerson, one of the actors. "I'm always optimistic!"