

Thrust into theater

*A young filmmaker
finds early
success on stage*

**By Tony Norman
Post-Gazette Staff Writer**

Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen has no ambitions of being the next August Wilson. In fact, the 23-year-old University of Pittsburgh film studies major wants to be filmmaker.

That won't stop Kuntu Repertory Theatre from staging "Traces," the product of a brief sojourn he took into playwriting three years ago. Kuntu has also hired Ron O.J. Parson, a visiting associate from Chicago's Onyx Theatre Ensemble to direct the play's two-week run at the Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium in Oakland.

Allen will accept your congratulations on the condition that you don't ask him to give up filmmaking for a shot at the Great White Way.

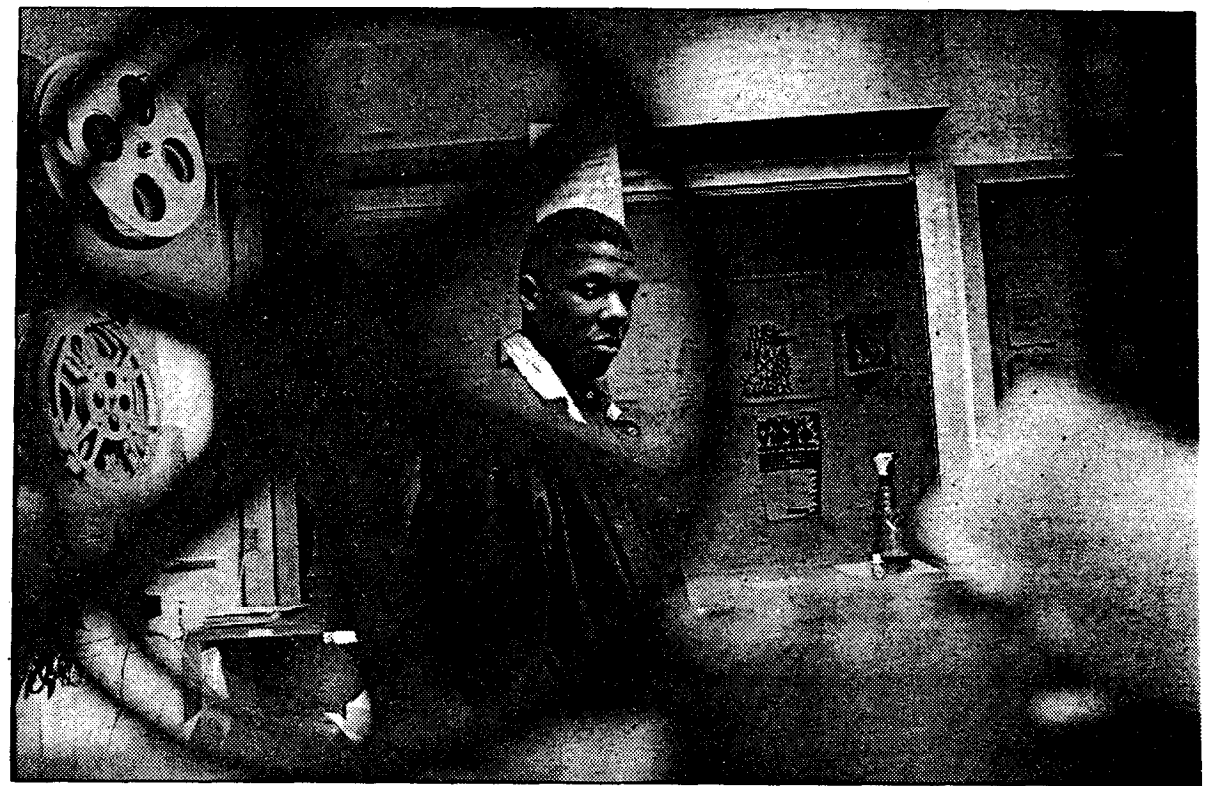
"'Traces' started out as a novel I wrote in high school," Allen says of his drama about adoption claims vs. blood claims. "I've always been interested in issues of what makes a good parent."

"Traces" is the story about two men — Matt and Sterling — who are fighting to raise the same boy. Sterling, the boy's biological father, has just been released from prison after an eight-year stint for something he didn't do. Sterling's former best friend and legal adviser Matt has been raising his son in the interim. The boy's mother, now dead, married Matt while Sterling was in prison.

The sense of betrayal throughout the play is compounded many times by circumstances that seem beyond everyone's control. The playwright is fascinated by such dilemmas, having been inspired by events in his own life.

A Pittsburgher for his first 12 years, Allen moved to Atlanta with his mother after she divorced his father.

The year he spent living with his



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On stage and screen: Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen checks out the equipment in his job at the Pittsburgh Filmmakers building in Oakland.

father before moving to the South had a profound effect on the budding playwright/filmmaker and spurred his interest in the dynamics of a family in crisis.

"After they broke up I never dealt with them both at the same time. I began missing one when I was with the other," he says. "And since I was around my dad least of all, I wanted to make a dad for myself to take his place — my own father figure in a way.

"Not that there's anything wrong with my dad," Allen hastens to add. "I just missed him. But instead of running to a particular person, I just used my imagination."

Allen became a playwright through a bit of serendipity when

Dr. Vernell Lillie, the director of Kuntu, noticed his youthful intensity and seriousness.

"I had Dr. Lillie for a black contemporary drama class," Allen said. "She liked my work and asked me to do a play for her . . . The whole purpose was to write a play she could enter in the Lorraine Hansberry competition. I entered it and came in third place, but she still wanted to do it."

Recently, Allen was honored at the Renaissance News' Black Extravaganza and Trailblazer Awards ceremony for writing "Traces."

The irony of his achievement hasn't been lost on Allen, who is aching to make a film, having written two unproduced screenplays. So far, he has several short films

under his belt and a longer, unfinished feature.

"I was really intimidated by the whole idea of writing a play, to tell you the truth," he said. "The whole content of a play is different than a screenplay. But I did it. If things would take a turn where I could make a successful living writing plays, I would do it. But I want to make films. I think I could do both. If done right, plays make good movies."

'TRACES'

Performances by Kuntu Repertory Theatre are at Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium, Oakland, through April 6. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 5 p.m.; April 4 matinee at 11 a.m. Tickets: \$10-\$15. 624-7298.