

STAGE / MUSIC

Kuntu's 'Traces' has heart, brains

By Christopher Rawson
Post-Gazette Drama Critic

In his program note, University of Pittsburgh student and playwright Gregory Khalil Kareem Allen says, "I have learned that my heroes are not to be found on a page or in imagination, but in the unwritten pages of life, in my own experience." He hopes that in his new play we will find no single hero but "traces" of many, along with recognition of the heroism in us all.

Allen is already wise enough to know that we refine our sense of integrity and value as we grow, choosing life models who help us discover ourselves — perhaps even by filling in our gaps.

The grace with which he says this and the necessary tentativeness of what he says (he's only 23!) are a telling introduction to his play, "Traces," staged by Kuntu Repertory Theatre.

It also has grace in the telling, filled with lively, thoughtful writing and difficult issues of personal identity and value. Structurally it's lumpy — long here, short there, with emotional U-turns — but it has brains and heart.

A 14-year-old boy (Howie Bullard) is caught between two fathers. Sterling (Jason Carvell) gave him birth and Matt (Leo Beatty) has raised and cared for him the last eight years, while Sterling was serving time for a crime he didn't commit.

That he did so to keep his own father from going to jail complicates the moral balance sheet.

This background remains murky.

STAGE REVIEW

'Traces'

Where: Kuntu Repertory Theatre, Stephen Foster Memorial, Oakland.

When: Through April 6 — 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sunday; 11 a.m. April 3.

Tickets: \$8-\$15; 624-7298, 731-6607 or 323-1919.

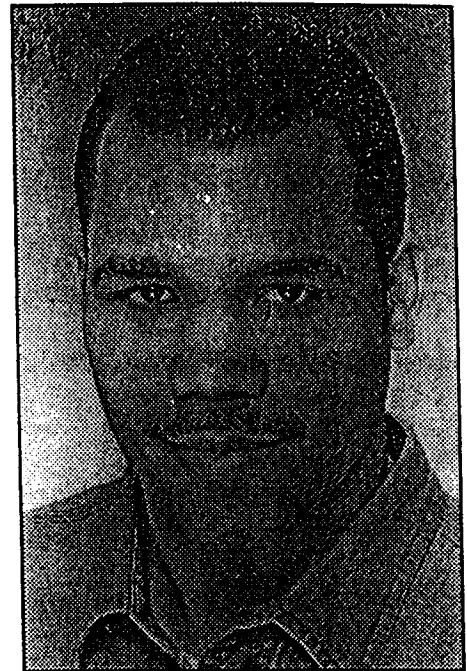
It's an example of Allen's difficulty with exposition, telling us about emotional significance rather than relying on what can happen on stage.

Much of the play is two characters talking at each other. It takes a long time to get to the central scenes and then they feel rushed. The split into unequal acts of 45 and 80 minutes is also odd.

But the main thing is the writing, which bubbles with life. Allen lavishes some of his jauntiest, wise-cracking best on a vibrant secondary character, Riley, a neonlit showcase for the burly, fast-talking Mark Smith.

Of the central figures, Sterling is the most vivid, perhaps because of the focused, intense acting of Carvell. Beatty expresses Matt's ambivalence and pain, but he struggles with his lines. Allen hasn't made him seem much like a lawyer and he backs him into some emotionally awkward corners. The boy is more realistic, and Bullard plays him with charm, able to ricochet between goofiness and anger.

Allen's heart seems to lean to-



Jason Alan Carvell
Focused, intense acting

ward Sterling (the name is a clue) and his head toward Matt, but he doesn't identify fully with any one of the three. I don't mean he should take sides, of course, but that he hasn't found their emotional cores.

The boy's name, not coincidentally, is Trace! No wonder he feels somewhat peripheral — just a trace of his parents' love? Or is he the blank on which society will inscribe different models of heroism?

As one who also had two fathers and who has children both born and adopted, I admit it took me years to discover that the "real" father is the one who does the parenting. You have to *earn* your fatherhood.

Allen knows that — "you've got to be a *man* before you become a father," Riley says — but he also gives credit to the force of blood.

As guest director Ron Parsons says in his program note, the play combats the stereotype of the African-American "invisible, dead-beat dad." Think of August Wilson, where society does the fathering. Allen has a big subject.