

by Ted Hoover

Traces of Greatness in Kuntu

Traces

Written by Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen
 Directed by Rod O. J. Parson
 Kuntu Repertory Theatre
 Stephen Foster Memorial Theatre
 Thru April 6, 624-7298

Kuntu Repertory Theatre presents the premiere of Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen's *Traces*, a wonderful new comedy/drama about what it means to be a father and a son.

Pay attention, the backstory of this play is amazingly baroque. Eight years ago Sterling Gamble, Sr. found himself in the midst of some shady construction business dealings. Rather than allow his father to go to prison, Sterling Gamble Jr. took the rap and landed in prison, leaving behind his common law wife and their son, Trace. The wife dies of cancer but not before marrying Sterling Jr's best friend Matt Anderson, who in the intervening years has raised Trace as his son. When the play opens, Sterling is released from jail and comes to Pittsburgh to reclaim his son from Matt, who not surprisingly, isn't dancing with joy at this turn of events. The play is the struggle the three men must go through to find some sort of peace in the whole mess.

And mess it is, too. The best aspect of Allen's script is his refusal to soften the moral complexity of the story. By the play's end you think perhaps the right thing has been done but then... maybe not. This ambiguity may, however, be one of the play's weaknesses, too; at least in terms of dramaturgy.

On one side is Matt and all he represents: He is a successful lawyer and very good with the boy. Sterling is a hot-head who left his family with the wolf at their door. But that act was also one of great sacrifice... for his own father. Allen's refusal to side with either man keeps the moral center of the play shifting back and forth... not unlike life, true, but it robs the play of its focus and some of its emotional impact.

Another of Allen's strengths/weaknesses is his ability to write glorious dialogue, reams and reams of the stuff come flowing out of his typewriter like some kind of demented seamstress meeting a deadline. His representation of the kid, Trace, is one of the few times you'll see a teenage character not written with condescension or cloying sit-com "cuteness." The problem is that it's so easy to get lost in his great dialogue that only later do you realize Allen is having his characters say the same thing over and over. But this problem, overwriting, will undoubtedly clear up as Allen continues with the protracted and absolutely

hateful practice of rewrites. (Call me Gregory, have I got stories...)

Director Rod O.J. Parson at times neglects to physically root his actors on stage. The blocking strays a bit into muddled and unfocused movement during some of the play's emotional confrontations. But Parson does a wonderful job getting terrific performances from his cast. Leo Beatty and Jason Carvel, as Matt and Sterling, imbue their characters with rock solid integrity and enormous compassion. Howie Bullard is their shared son and plays his complex character with an understanding amazing in such a young actor. Ira Cambric III is big fun as one of Trace's school friends and Mark D. Smith is highly compelling in the role of Sterling's associate, Riley Wade, a really intriguing dramatic creation by Allen.

There's little doubt that *Traces*, and its author, are going big places. You absolutely don't want to miss seeing either one of them before they do.