

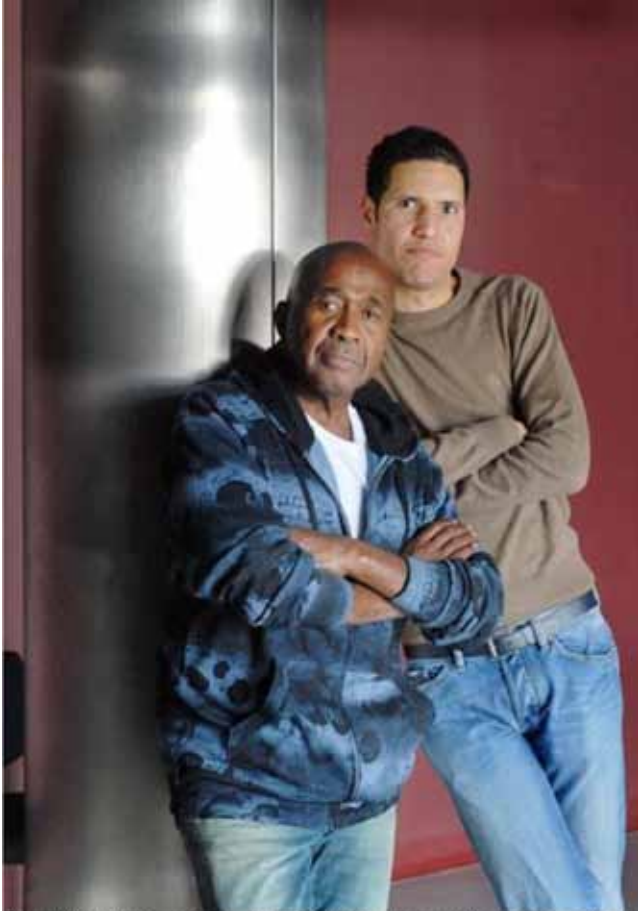
TIME OFF

Jan. 1, 2010

EVERYTHING TO PRAISE

By Adam Grybowski

Playwright Will Power revives the friendship between Stepin Fetchit and Muhammad Ali in 'Fetch Clay, Make Man'



From left: In Will Power's new play at McCarter Theatre, Ben Vereen vindicates Stepin Fetchit. TIMEOFF/MARK CZAJKOWSKI

IN the mid-1970s, the now legendary showman Ben Vereen donned black face in tribute to the turn-of-the-century black entertainer Bert Williams.

Lincoln Perry noticed the performance. Though he was America's first black movie star, Perry had become a symbol of black degradation for his film persona, Stepin Fetchit, the dim-witted "Laziest Man in the World."

When the two men met backstage, the fallen star asked Mr. Vereen to vindicate him, that the perception of him as a traitor to his race was wrong.

Nearly 35 years passed before Mr. Vereen was given the chance to answer Fetchit's wish, by accepting the role of Stepin Fetchit in Will Power's new play, *Fetch Clay, Make Man*. The play, premiering at McCarter Theatre Jan. 8 and running through Feb. 14, dramatizes Fetchit's friendship with Muhammad Ali (Evan Parke), based on true events.

"I said I would vindicate him, and this is my opportunity," Mr. Vereen says. "It hasn't been easy slipping into these waters for me, but I came to a conclusion: My people ain't got nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, we should be proud of everything we went through."

Fetchit's controversial legacy is still debated: Did he endorse the status quo or subvert it? His name has become part of the American lexicon, even if the connotation can be painful. Mr. Power portrays Fetchit as a man struggling to redeem the image he harnessed to become the first black actor to earn a screen credit, as well as \$1 million.

"People like Stepin Fetchit and Muhammed Ali, these are men that had such an influence in our community, whether they were understood or misunderstood," Mr. Power says. "Fetchit was a complex man and he did have another agenda, so I think there's a lot more to the story than what we see."

When Mr. Vereen read the script, he wondered if Mr. Power had met Fetchit. "Will has written it so well," he says. "A lot of what is in there was what Step told me."

As part of his research, Mr. Power interviewed people who knew Fetchit and listened to him on tape. But the technical aspect of creating this play is only half the story, Mr. Power says. "There's an energy here. There's a need to tell this story. In a lot of ways it's bigger than who I am. I feel like the energy came through me to tell the story. Where it comes from, I don't really know."

The story's original spark was lit in a San Francisco bookstore, where Mr. Power saw a large book of Ali photographs.

"It was on its own stand, like the Holy Grail or something," he says. He flipped to a page showing a picture of Ali and Fetchit standing together, circa mid 1960s. The image shocked him.

"I was like, What the heck is Stepin Fetchit doing next to Muhammad Ali?" he says. "That took me on a quest to discover how they were friends. I just started finding out things that I couldn't make up about their connection. It was crazy to me that people had missed this unique, special relationship."

Previous to his research, Mr. Power had perceived the iconic statures of Fetchit and Ali to be opposite in nature: the defiant Ali versus the subservient Fetchit, the new Black Man versus the old Black Man, The Greatest versus The Laziest. Discovering they were friends activated Mr. Power's mind: What does their friendship say about identity, image, race?

"This is a play about creating or trying to define or redefine your image," he says. When Ali defeated Sonny Liston to become heavyweight champion in 1964, he was just 22 and still known as Cassius Clay. In the 15 months between his first and second bout with Liston, he married cocktail waitress Sonji Roi, aligned himself with the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammed Ali.

In *Fetch Clay*, Sonequa Martin plays Sonji Clay, Richard Masur plays movie mogul William Fox and John Earl Jelks plays Brother Rashid, Ali's bodyguard. Each character wrestles with their self-conception and projected image.

"I don't want to hate on any other cast I've worked with, but this is the most amazing cast of actors I've ever worked with in my life," Mr. Power says. "It's five actors and each one is a powerhouse, so together it's amazing."

As a child, Mr. Power says he watched Mr. Vereen, whose performances on Broadway, film and television have been hailed for nearly 40 years. Best known for the role of Chicken George in *Roots*, Mr. Vereen is also known for his humanitarian work and one-man shows. He'll perform *An Evening With Ben Vereen*, a tribute to Broadway, Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr., at McCarter Feb. 1.

"What he brings is not only his wealth of experience as a theater icon, but he brings his authenticity of knowing Stepin Fetchit," says Mr. Power, who has earned a reputation as a pioneer in hip hop theater, fusing original music, rhymed language and choreography in his previous plays. In *The Seven*, his adaptation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, he replaced the traditional chorus with a D.J. *Fetch Clay* is his first time writing a play in conventional form, and he infuses his spirit into the language.

"What's interesting is that, though for the most part the play is in conventional dialogue, I bring certain kind of rhythms to it," he says. "It's not hip hop rhymes. But even the way people talk, the language has a lot of rhythm. It's almost a stylized language."

In making this leap, writing lines for Ali served as a fitting bridge. "It can be argued that Ali was the first hip hop artist," Mr. Power says. "Even for him to say some of the political or social things that he said with that braggadocious tone, it reminds me of today's MCs. A lot of the first generation of rappers in the '70s and '80s were influenced by Ali. I think it can be argued that he was a pioneer of that, not just in his rhyme but in his attitude."

During an interview two weeks before the opening, Mr. Vereen says it is through language that characters emerge, and that he was still discovering Fetchit.

"My thing is to be honest with the character, with the word, which is the trail to the heart of the spirit of the man," the Tony Award winner says. "The word is key. If you listen to the word, the word opens up. It says in the Bible, in the beginning was the word. That means it is the key to the universe of deeper feelings. So if you get the word and you sit with the word and trust the word, then the word will carry you through."

Prior to receiving the script, Mr. Vereen's son-in-law, the painter Noah Davis, had completed a portrait of Fetchit. His name was in the air. Mr. Vereen had been unaware of Fetchit's friendship with Ali, who claimed that Fetchit taught him the notorious "anchor punch" he used to knock out Liston in one round. Fetchit apparently learned it from Jack Johnson.

Mr. Vereen views Fetchit as an artist who was bamboozled by his own people and his story as part of the larger one of the African-American experience.

"When you think about what we've endured as a black people in this country, it is amazing," he says. "To be brought here as slaves and to be ridiculed and beaten and beaten down. We are an amazing people and we have nothing to be ashamed of and when we put down our own people we are putting ourselves down when we should be praising and uplifting ourselves."

"We have nothing to be ashamed of. We have everything to praise. And that's what's so great about this piece. We are praising two people in our history who are icons."

Fetch Clay, Make Man will be performed at McCarter Theatre, 91 University Place, Princeton, Jan. 8-Feb. 24. Performances: Tues.-Thurs. 7:30 p.m., Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 3, 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Two additional performances will be held Jan. 25 and Feb. 7, 7:30 p.m. 609-258-2787; www.mccarter.org