

248521

WHAT'S NEW

ARTICLES

BOOKS

ZINES

BIO

LINKS

SEARCH

CONTACT ME

**Isiah Whitlock, Jr.: Getting Past a Character's External to the Despair Inside**

SOMETIMES the role of a lifetime is the part nobody else wanted to play. In Christopher Shinn's "Four," in previews at the Manhattan Theater Club, where it opens on Tuesday, Isiah Whitlock Jr. plays Joe, a middle- aged black English professor who leaves his teenage daughter in charge of his sick wife on the Fourth of July and goes on a movie- and-motel date with a 16-year-old boy he has picked up on the Internet.

"On the page, this guy could be a monster," said the director, Jeff Cohen. "You want to hate him, but you don't, because Isiah makes this character so immediate. He explodes any preconceived notions you have. Here's this conservative middle-class black guy, and being out on this date liberates him. It's like he's 18 and at the prom. You see his vulnerability."

Mr. Cohen is the artistic director of the Worth Street Theater Company, which mounted the play last summer in TriBeCa. Mr. Whitlock and Keith Nobbs played Joe and June, the gay teenager, while Vinessa Antoine and Armando Riesco portrayed Joe's daughter, Abigayle, and Dexter, the schoolmate with whom she ambivalently pursues a sexual connection.

Reviewing it then in The New York Times, Ben Brantley called "Four" a "smart, brokenhearted new play," which, despite its "raw spots," marked Mr. Shinn as "a playwright to reckon with." And, he wrote, "each of the cast members is excellent, showing a subtle understanding for the ways people wound one another through fear." With one cast change — Pascale Armand now plays Abigayle — the production has transferred to Stage 2 of the Manhattan Theater Club.

The play already had a track record: a first reading at Ensemble Studio Theater in 1996; a showcase production at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1998; a world premiere later that year at the Royal Court Theater in London. In New York, a workshop production at the Cherry Lane Theater in 1999 was followed by the official American premiere in 2000 at About Face, a gay theater company in Chicago.

Although he didn't portray Joe in the London or Chicago productions, Mr. Whitlock has been crucial to the play's development since the showcase in Pittsburgh. "They couldn't get anybody to do the reading," the 47-year-old actor recalled recently. He was having coffee at a diner in Chelsea, near the apartment he shares with Wilma Mondí, an actress who has been his partner for 15 years. "They called me and said, 'Your name keeps coming up as someone who does these types of plays.' "

He chuckled at the euphemism and continued. "What they meant, I

x2/857/2

think, is that the role is a challenge. A lot of people didn't want to bother investigating what it's like to be a black male professor, on the outs with his wife, picking up boys on the Internet. They just look at the surface, say he's a pedophile and dismiss him. If you look beneath the surface, though, you see universal elements of despair, longing and the desperate need we all have to be loved, to be liked. I never focus on the external. There's so much inside. Then whatever fears you have diminish because you're dealing with something so universal and concrete."

Offstage, Mr. Whitlock radiates the same mixture of qualities that makes his performance in "Four" indelible. Solid, quiet and friendly, he has a rich, resonant voice and an easy laugh. Yet there is also a reticence that is equal parts modesty, intelligence and pain carefully processed to emerge as kindness.

Having observed Mr. Whitlock in the Pittsburgh, Cherry Lane and Worth Street Theater incarnations of "Four," Mr. Shinn said: "His process as an actor is very mysterious to me. He translates whatever you ask him to do in a very private way that he doesn't feel compelled to share with the rehearsal."

The playwright described his favorite part of Mr. Whitlock's performance. "It's the final moment of the play, where Joe says goodbye to June and gives him a gift. Isiah plays it so beautifully. What he does that's so moving is that he has a sense of the importance of the evening for this kid far more than the kid does. He knows June has lost his virginity and will remember this experience for the rest of his life. He tries to give their final moments together a grace and an understanding that June doesn't yet feel. It's a selfless moment, following a difficult evening. Joe ends the play by giving June a future, which is what so many gay teenagers don't feel that they have. As a writer, you can indicate that in the text, but something that profound can only happen through the performance."

A life in the theater has taken Mr. Whitlock very far from his origins as the fifth of 11 children who grew up poor in South Bend, Ind. His father worked the night shift at a steel mill, and during the day drove his truck around hauling trash from private homes. "My brother Don and I would ride in the truck with him all day, and I learned a lot about dealing with people," Mr. Whitlock said. "I learned that everything is negotiable."

He attended Southwest State University in Marshall, Minn., on a football scholarship. Constant injuries compelled him to turn his energies elsewhere. Being cast as the jailer in "The Crucible" awakened his serious interest in acting and he began studying psychology as a background for character work.

When he graduated in 1976, he moved to San Francisco to study at the American Conservatory Theater, whose acting ensemble he subsequently joined. "Doing rotating repertory and working with great older actors like Sydney Walker, Peter Donat and Marian Walters gave me great respect for the theater," he said. A desire to be involved with new plays led him to New York, where it took a while to get

established. But after playing small roles on Broadway in Larry Gelbart's "Mastertgate" and "The Merchant of Venice" with Dustin Hoffman, both in 1989, he has worked steadily.

In recent years, he received good reviews for his performances as a hit man who dreams of breeding horses in Lee MacDougall's "High Life" at Primary Stages and as a schoolteacher who counsels a former student on death row in Romulus Linney's adaptation of Ernest J. Gaines's novel "A Lesson Before Dying" at the Signature Theater. Mr. Whitlock considers the role of the teacher a high point in his stage career. "I enjoyed telling that story," he said. "That's what I like most about acting — telling a story."

He has appeared on television and in movies ("Goodfellas," "The Spanish Prisoner"), and he would like to do more. If there is an actor whose career he aspires to, it would be someone like either Gary Oldman or John Malkovich. "I like that they're chameleonic," Mr. Whitlock said. "I relate to that. You think I'm one way, and I'll surprise you. On 'Law and Order,' I played a serial killer — which nobody ever saw me as, and that's usually the case of guys out there burying bodies."

Mr. Whitlock said he would also like to do more television because that's how his family gets to see his work. They traveled to Detroit to see him in the national tour of August Wilson's "Piano Lesson." Once, his father took a bus from Indiana to San Francisco to see him in "The Little Foxes": "He slept through the show, but he had my brother wake him up when I came on."

Mr. Whitlock still has vivid memories of growing up in a large clan, eating in shifts and sharing a bed until he was a teenager. On the other hand, "I always had somebody to play with," he said. And, as he made his way as an actor, struggle was nothing new. When he first moved to New York, he lived at a seedy S.R.O. hotel in pre-Disney Times Square without ever registering the experience as dangerous or unsavory. "If there's one thing I know how to do," he said, "it's survive."

New York Times, February 17, 2002