

THEATER

`Clay' molded into a tour de force

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By Alison Neumer Lara

Matt Sax shoves the brim of his baseball cap low over his face and struts, hip-hop style, across the stage. Palming the microphone, he drops to his knees and begins to rap.

"I wear LA Lights on my feet / to lighten my step / OshKosh hat to the side / Ninja Turtle in hand left / I take a quick breath / survey the courtroom at a glance / mom and dad stand far apart -- they're not holding hands."

In quick succession, Sax transforms his body and face into that of a small scared boy's, then pantomimes a disaffected chain smoker followed by an overweight woman and a bailiff before returning to the form of a bewildered child in custody court. Each character is distinct, convincing, compelling.

A few months out of Northwestern University, Sax, 22, is about to star in his one-man hip-hop musical under the aegis of Lookingglass Theatre Company and About Face Theatre. "Clay," which debuted at the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, tells the story of a suburban boy from a broken home who becomes a rap star but can't escape his frayed family roots. A revised production opens Tuesday at Lookingglass' new 50-seat Chase Studio Theatre.

But at the moment, computers, notebooks and the odd bag of chips are scattered across the studio's risers. It's the first day of rehearsal in the new space, and Sax is bouncing on his toes.

"This is so overwhelming. It's amazing," he gushes.

Minutes ago, he signed his first Actors Equity Association contract and now he's brandishing a freebie water bottle with the union logo. "It tastes like privilege," Sax cracks.

Maybe, but Sax might also credit ambition, considerable pluck and a roster of heavy-hitting supporters.

Talent and backing

"I'm totally devoted to Matt Sax and I think he's a brilliant, brilliant young man," says Frank Galati, a Tony award-winning director, writer and a professor of performance studies at Northwestern.

Sax's ability to transform into different characters is "uncanny," Galati says, recalling his former star student's class performances.

"It's mimetic, but when it's at a very high level, it's an embodiment of soul. I know that sounds lofty but when you ... experience the variety of characters Matt plays, you're left breathless by his extraordinary virtuosity."

Growing up in New York's Westchester County, Sax regularly headed to the theater in

Manhattan. He started formally studying theater as a teen and received classical training at the Juilliard School, Stella Adler Studio and Lee Strasberg Institute -- all of which, Sax admits, were "a bit beyond me" at the time.

Certain shows, however, left strong impressions on the young actor, including an electrifying production of Sam Shepard's "True West" in 2000 starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly, who famously switched roles every night. Sax went back to see both versions.

He also devoured, in a single sitting in London, eight hours of "Henry IV," a play Sax credits as one of many inspirations for "Clay," particularly the character of Sir John (modeled on Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff), who guides the young rapper in Sax's work.

Hip-hop influence

But as a vocabulary for "Clay," hip-hop was the natural choice, says Sax, a long-time fan of the genre. "Inevitable," he insists.

"For someone who loves music, and who had never learned how to play an instrument -- I sort of taught myself to play a piano and taught myself a little guitar -- the hip-hop aesthetic has allowed me to express myself musically ... through electronics," says Sax, who created the score on computer during his sophomore year of college.

That spring Sax raised \$20,000, gathered a crew of 10 students and headed to the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe Festival to premiere "Clay," which received strong reviews. Soon, Sax was entertaining offers to bring the show to South Africa, Australia and Los Angeles.

At Northwestern, Sax had already built a bit of a following with student John Dixon. For four years, the two mounted an annual improv-based comedy sketch revue, "Sax and Dixon," which they performed this month for the first time at the New York International Fringe Festival.

"[Matt] is certainly the most explosive performer I know. Very few people our age have that," says Dixon, speaking by phone from New York.

But Sax's improvisations and characterizations can also be subtle and precise, Dixon says.

"One of his strengths is specificity, which is kind of an improv term," continues Dixon. "The average actor can mime taking grocery items off a shelf, which is kind of general and not that interesting. Matt can express taking off the shelf a box of cake mix and that he absolutely hates it."

'Clay' develops

In spring 2005, Galati invited another former student, Eric Rosen, co-founder of About Face and a noted director, writer and dramaturge, to see Sax perform the show at the school's Evanston campus. Rosen recalls feeling incredibly moved by Sax's sad, dark and funny writing.

"In the end, Frank and I were weeping. I'm not sure we understood why we were weeping," Rosen says. "I was so impressed by the musicality of the show and the concert format. It was about 10 songs or so sung by the characters, and each of the characters steps up, almost like vaudeville."

Rosen immediately offered to help Sax develop "Clay," and ultimately direct it. A year later, Lookingglass decided to include it in its 2006-07 season.

"When I saw it, it was a concept album as much as it was a play," Rosen says. In refining the work, "what we've been trying to do is marry those two impulses, sharpen the show, make it more audible and clarify its storytelling while retaining the joy and crazy chaotic energy of what I saw that night."

Rosen pulls out the set designer's model to demonstrate how rows of theatrical curtains will emphasize the play's experience, where as outside in the lobby will be a wild, graffiti-saturated street space to highlight the show's hip-hop character.

For Sax, "Clay" is a response to the growing hip-hop theater scene, as well as an entry point for a younger crowd intimidated by what he sees as the pretentious, sometimes remote side of theater.

"I didn't feel like my generation's voice was being heard in the theater," Sax says. "I always wanted to change people's minds about what theater is."

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