

## **Student's hip-hop play goes transatlantic**

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By Sam Weiner

Walking into Matt Sax's apartment, he asks to go outside so he can smoke a cigarette.

"Sorry if I chain smoke, I'm pretty stressed out," Sax warns.

And with good reason. Sax is taking "Clay," a one-man hip-hop play that he wrote and stars in, to the Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland this summer. While across the Atlantic, Sax will perform the play 24 times. The festival runs Aug. 8-30.

"This is far and away the most risky thing I've ever done," Sax says. "But with great risks come great rewards."

"Clay" is performed as a concert of fictional rapper Clay, whose real name is Clifford Keyes, and is composed entirely of songs that tell the rapper's life story. The show's songs address the separation of Keyes' parents, the suicide of his mother while she was on the phone with him and an affair between Keyes and his stepmother.

Sax rapped "The Parently Love," expressing Clifford's desire for his stepmother: "Old enough to birth me/ This woman's unearthly/ With god-given talents/ That will make the whole church scream."

Despite the serious subject, Sax insists that the play is "funnier than it may seem."

Keyes eventually meets Sir John, an underground rapper who teaches him how to express himself through hip hop.

Hip hop's roots in black culture juxtaposed with a white Sax serve as the major message in the show.

"Being white is an aspect of the show that I'm going to have to deal with," Sax says. "If I can show that struggle is at the heart of hip hop, then I can justify it."

Sax, a Communication sophomore, hopes to bring "Clay" to either Chicago or New York after the festival, depending on how well it is received in Edinburgh.

"The show tries to attract a younger audience, people who would normally not be attracted to theater," Sax says. "This is an effort to connect with the audience, by speaking the language of our generation."

Sax has raised money through an undergraduate research grant, the School of Communication, donation letters, the Alumnae of Northwestern and an April party, billed as "The Biggest Party Ever."

He also plans to sell the show's CD, which will be recorded in July. Sax has a crew of seven who will help him out at the festival, at which playwrights apply for specific venues to stage their productions.

The intense planning and work necessary for the success of "Clay" is not lost on Sax's peers and instructors.

"It's a brave thing to do, especially taking it to Edinburgh," says David Downs, associate professor of theatre who teaches Sax.

Sax said he sees opportunity in the immense responsibility.

"The business aspect is real hard," Sax said. "That's why I feel fortunate (though) -- it's completely under my control."

Sax's performance will require much focus, something he's quite used to doing.

"When he's in rehearsal, he's there 100 percent," says Samantha Long, one of Sax's teammates in The Titanic Players. "He just doesn't bring any outside crap in his life."

So how did Sax arrive at marketing his own play overseas?

"I started writing this in the fall, but it had been in the making for a while," Sax says.

With minimal encouragement from his parents, Sax studied theater from a young age, particularly from what he calls "high-profile, pretentious fucking places."

These experiences, along with rappers such as Talib Kweli, Pharoahe Monch and the late Notorious B.I.G., influenced Sax's writing. But he also holds a special place in his heart for Mos Def.

"(Mos Def) is someone who has taken an acting sensibility and incorporated it into hip hop," Sax said.

According to Sax, there's been very little mixing of hip hop and theater.

"Theatrically, hip-hop theater has been limited to spoken word," Sax says. "(But) no one has done what I'm doing before."

Communication sophomore Matt Sax will take his play "Clay" to a festival in Scotland this summer.