



A glimpse inside children's chaotic world

By Karen Houppert | Special To The Sun
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Al Letson, who spent a summer running a writing program for disadvantaged kids, ran into a few challenges.

"This ain't school!" a skeptical kid challenges. "Talk to the hand, talk to the hand, talk to the hand," a child chants.

An 8-year-old girl spits in his face. Three times. Hired as a sort of camp counselor/writer-in-residence for a community center in Jacksonville, Fla., called The Sanctuary, Letson tumbles into a deeply troubling world - and then tries to write and perform his way out of it. A Summer in Sanctuary, playing at the Theatre Project through March 2, is his intimate portrait of the chaotic world of gangs, drugs and violence these children inhabit. It is also an amusing reflection on Letson's personal quest as a fumbling - sometimes bumbling - teacher trying desperately to reach them. Like Anna Deavere-Smith, the grand dame of one-woman shows who plays 20 characters in any given evening, Letson is a powerful performer who tells his story by moving fluidly from one role to the next. He is at his comedic best when playing both himself - overly sincere and eager - and the sassy kids who badger him - "Mr. Al, why you make us do this corny ... stuff?" - as they frustrate his every effort to barge in as the "poet laureate" of Jacksonville, proffering art as salvation. The whole summer begins inauspiciously when the director of The Sanctuary introduces Letson to the surly day-campers by urging him to perform. Put on the spot, Letson graciously concedes, performing a poem he has written about basketball that he figures will appeal to kids and teens. The poem, which Letson proceeds to re-



enact, is beautifully choreographed to evoke the rhythms of a basketball bouncing on asphalt. "One boy, one ball, one dream," Letson chants, dribbling as he channels the intensity that allows a troubled world to slip away. "None of that matters. Here it's all about the ball, the rim and him." Silence.

And then the audience at the Theatre Project applauds. Letson steps out of the moment to acknowledge the clapping. "See, you're normal," he tells the crowd. "But I'm looking at these blank eyes and I don't get nothing from these kids." Maybe they don't know they're supposed to clap after a performance? Letson can't figure it out. He tells us that he waits and then finally begins clapping for himself, to show the kids how it's done. "And really," he says to us, "there is nothing sadder than a performer clapping for himself." It is a lovely, adept moment in a show full of similar gems. A skilled writer and actor, the playful Letson teases his audience like a skillful fisherman. He reels us into one of his extended anecdotes about life at The Sanctuary, specifically embodying each child in his cast of characters with a distinctive nervous stutter here, a reflexive hand over crotch there and then jerks the line,

yanking us out with a dash of irony and self-mockery back into the present.

Letson drifts back to his narrator moments behind a Spalding Gray-inspired desk - the only furniture on a stage that is empty, aside from the DJ (Willie Evans Jr.) who cues up occasional music and slides. He tells us that he walked away from the summer having learned, very early on, that you have to win every battle with these kids. If you don't, you'll be perceived as weak or worse, irrelevant. So when one of his most belligerent charges, Dayvon, challenges him to a game of basketball Letson hesitates.

"Do you know what it is like to grow up as a young black man who doesn't play basketball?" he asks his audience. Letson confesses that he is so un-athletic that he had to have a friend help him choreograph the aforementioned poem about basketball so he didn't look like a complete idiot. Back at The Sanctuary, poised on the side of a basketball court, Letson has to decide whether he'll take some personal risks to reach these kids.

Ultimately, Letson embraces risk, both in his work with the kids and in his work in the theater. A Summer in Sanctuary lays bare Letson's personal journey as a teacher, writer and performer. And while some of the bridges that connect his vignettes are weak and, often, unnecessary, they are the minor distractions of a talented artist who doesn't yet trust the power of his anecdotal material to make his point.

In this world premiere of his newest piece, Letson may be working out a few kinks - like a somewhat labored ending that stretches too hard for an epiphany - but just when the show's conclusion threatens to slip into bathos, he catches himself with the mocking words of his young charge who regularly challenges him: "Mr. Al, why you do that corny ... stuff?"