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Transcript of Review of Summer in Sanctuary by Martha Thomas

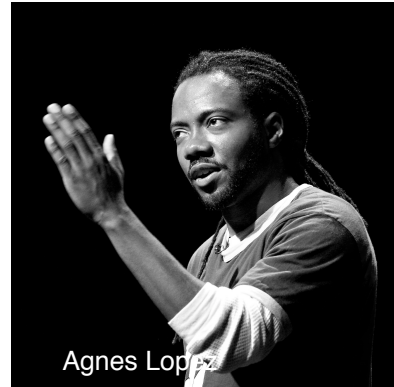
Al Letson's Summer in Sanctuary was anything but safe. He worked with inner-city kids at a community center called the Sanctuary on 8th street in Jacksonville Florida. For a guy who'd grown in a middle class NJ family that resembles the Huxtabales, the experience was shattering. Hired as a counselor and writing teacher he was exposed to abject poverty for the first time in his life and he finishes the summer feeling as helpless as when he began.

His one-man show at Theatre Project takes us on a ride. Fast, turbulent, filled with ruckus, or slowing down for contemplation, picking up some characters along the way. He's an engaging presence blending the language of a poet with the language of the streets. Moving in and out of character as easy as flipping his hands or shrugging his shoulder. Letson fills the large stage, empty but for a lone desk, and a dj/sound guy in the corner with the personalities he appropriates. There are the kids; bossy Danita, challenging Devon, complacent Biko, and his boss Vicky who has the patience and resilience of a saint, qualities that Letson himself seems to doubt he could ever possess. He's agile with both his voice and his body. He ricochets about the stage, braids flapping shifting from exposition to poetry when the emotional content becomes too much.

Letson makes sure we know from the start that he's in over his head. Opening with the image of trying to calm an 8 year old girl Angela who spits in his face and calls him a drug dealer. His boss encourages him to perform for the kids and he reluctantly recites a rap style poem about basketball with moves and sound effects. He puts everything he has into it but is met with stubborn and suspicious silence.

Over the summer Letson achieves victories large and small. A non athlete by his own admission, perhaps the only black kid in the US who doesn't play basketball, he nevertheless pulls off and a one on one match with doubting Devon. He takes the

boys on a road trip and uses a filmmaking project to release some steam, possibly preventing a tragedy. He tries to maintain his footing but staying one step ahead.



Letson reaches back to his

Christian faith, calming the little girl with the words "God love you and so do I" recalling his own childhood as the son of a preacher. But he doesn't seem to recognize the God in small things. By the end of the summer he describes the smell of defeat as strong as when he started. But we in the audience know something he doesn't. He tells us, of how hungry they kids are for attention, but he doesn't recognize the sustenance that he himself provides.

Al Letson is an award winning slam poet familiar to Baltimore audiences and this is his third production at Theater Project. A world premier, Summer in Sanctuary has a few kinks to iron out. For one thing it's too long, and while Letson hold our attention, the piece would benefit from editing. The ending could come sooner without losing impact. By the end we are exhausted we've lived thought a lot with Letson he's done a good job sharing the bumpy ride that was his summer at the Sanctuary.

