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[THEATER]

**An Actor Prepared...**

Hardwick actor Edgar Davis turns in a powerfully taut performance as Walter Lee Younger

by Erik Esckilsen (11/01/06).

Hardwick may be a long, long way from Hollywood, but for the past two years, it's hosted a rare dramatic talent. In the summer of 2005, local resident and actor Edgar Davis wowed Vermont audiences in two Unadilla Theater productions by South African playwright Athol Fugard: *Master Harold and the Boys* and *The Island*. More recently, he's come down from the hills to steal another show, as the lead in the current Champlain Theatre at Champlain College production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. A St. Louis native, Davis draws on acting experience that spans two decades and includes film and stage work from coast to coast.



EDGAR DAVIS

Davis turns in a powerfully taut performance in Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 masterpiece as Walter Lee Younger, the angry Chicago chauffeur who dreams of investing his deceased father's life insurance payout in a liquor store. Certainly some biographical similarities between actor and character enhance this portrayal. Each is a Midwestern African-American man living in a female-dominated household. Each is roughly middle-aged — Walter Lee is 35, Davis 44. Each occupies a dwelling in need of repairs — the roof of Davis' 1899 Hardwick home leaks, he says. And each has his eye on a bigger prize.

For Davis, that prize is not superstardom, but the means to make a living as an actor while enjoying Vermont's vaunted quality of life. Striking the balance is a challenge, to say the least. In general, Davis says, "Living in Hardwick is pretty simple. It's a good speed." But when a stage or screen role is announced in a larger market, such as Boston, Davis finds that "It's like a whole-day thing just to spend five minutes in an audition, and damn near impossible if you have a day job."

Luckily for the Champlain production, Davis is between day jobs at the moment. He had been working at Mac's Market in Stowe until gas prices made the commute from Hardwick a pricey proposition. (If only Walter Lee Younger could exercise such fiscal responsibility.)

Davis and his wife Shari Cornish moved to Vermont in late summer 2004 and took up residence in an old family home, along with Cornish's sister. That move marked the end of a long professional journey for Davis — from his undergraduate days in Kansas City to acting stints in the Twin Cities and, for a spell in the late 1990s, Los Angeles. Davis enjoyed some success in L.A. when he landed a small speaking part in actor Bill Paxton's directorial debut, *Frailty*. But the pace — and cost — of Left Coast living sent Davis and Cornish packing to Asheville, North Carolina. There Davis made a Vermont acting connection when he appeared in a North Carolina Stage Company production of *Midwives*, Vermont playwright Dana Yeaton's stage adaptation of Vermont author Chris Bohjalian's novel.

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### Bringing in the Firewood

While that role had no bearing on his subsequent move north, Davis seems well acclimated to his adoptive state. A live-and-let-live outlook comes through as he tells the story of his life and career. In conversation, Davis is inclined to focus less on the challenges of being black in a racially homogenous state than on the nationwide struggle to make art *and* a living. He's friendly and direct one moment, hunched over in stocky contemplation the next. Get him going on the difference between good and bad theater, and he's full of opinions.

For one thing, Davis is wary of what he considers to be pat interpretations and methods. That's evident in his unconventional approach to the portrayal of Walter Lee Younger. "People like to talk about the racial aspect of the play and the social aspect of the play; people go to those obvious relationships," Davis says. "There's something people don't like to address, and that's the biological aspect of being a guy. I think there are some things that are very hard-wired in the male psyche."

One of them, he explains, is the innate male need to be the provider, which Walter Lee clearly can't manage. And Walter Lee's business scheme hardly earns him respect. As he laments, "Man says to his woman, 'I've got a dream.' His woman says, 'Eat your eggs.'" Davis elaborates: "You have black women who, because of their experience, aren't as dependent on males. So they are stronger, and the need for men or a man's place gets diminished."

While Davis believes that his male conditioning helps him understand Walter Lee on one level, he considers Hansberry's script the most important place to look for motivation. "I am a firm believer in not embellishing," he says. "In other words, speak the words as they are written. . . I'm not going to rewrite her play. I'm not going to make it fit my view of the world."

In other words, Davis eschews the contemporary method of dredging up father issues and sundry psychological wounds to animate a character. Instead, he respects the sanctity of the script. It's a strategy reinforced in his "bible," playwright David Mamet's *True and False*, an extended essay entreating actors to serve the text above all.

Kent Stephens, one of Davis' first acting teachers at the Kansas City Art Institute, set him on a course away from turning character study into thinly veiled therapy. "He told us, right off the bat, 'We're not going to do any exercises,'" Davis remembers. "But as you go from production to production, you will be able to survive the bullshit out there masquerading as theater. It's not about you at all. It's really not about the actor."

Davis took Stephens' advice to heart in performance-art classes. There he says he endured criticism for being "so 19th century" when he chose to tell stories through performance rather than present the kind of "repellent" work then in vogue. "I got sick of going to performances and seeing these people spew all their venom," he says. "I don't want to sit there and listen to you scream, 'Fuck you, Dad' for 10 minutes."

Davis' distaste for pedantic forms of theater was sown much earlier, though — in his Pentecostal upbringing as the son of what he calls a "fire and brimstone" preacher. Davis recalls the working-class congregants who summoned a kind of false strength from the church's "emotional manipulations." He says the experience enhanced his sensitivity to a character like Walter Lee, who occupies a subservient station in life.

As no-nonsense as his acting style may be, Davis is known for his affable, lighthearted manner, onstage and off. "He's got a great sense of humor . . . Edgar can make things very funny," says Unadilla Artistic Director Bill Blachly, recalling his Fugard performances. "He sees the irony and humor in ways that not everybody does." In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Davis skillfully leavens with wit many moments in the otherwise tense, dramatic play.

Did Davis' dream get "deferred" — as the Langston Hughes poem puts it — somewhere between Kansas City and the Northeast Kingdom? He readily admits he'd welcome another round of residual checks, such as those he collected for a while after appearing in a TV ad for the Old Country Buffet restaurant chain. But he's content to be in Hardwick for now. Davis says he isn't making the same mistake he sees Walter Lee Younger making day after day, night after night — being "envious and frustrated" at his prospects. "I'm happy because I know more than I did when I was younger," Davis explains. "Fewer things bother me. There's less conflict in my life. The only benefit of age is wisdom — but that's enough."



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