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The Brass Medallion

8 Searching for Manhood

By Gwendolyn Scotton

The lights dimmed in Ira Aldridge Theatre as opening night for "The Brass Medallion," by Ajamu unfolded. Stage lights shone on the cell block of sleeping inmates—one by one rising sullenly to the crackling shouts of the prison guard.

Set in a reformatory, "The Brass Medallion" came to life gripping the audience with its stark reality. The actors' performance proved equal to the genuineness of the play as the characters revealed themselves as young inmates searching for and acting out their perceptions of true manhood.

Bigsby is the inmate who symbolizes the mental state of men who feel they must constantly prove their manhood. To him, manhood is "softening up" the incoming prisoners. It is raping them of their manhood — both physically and mentally—thereby reinforcing his status among them. Bigsby is angrily called, "king of the pig pen," in one tense scene by the number two man, Tatum. Tatum secretly wishes and aspires to be king himself.

When Bigsby gets a look at the new inmates, he immediately decides that he must break the toughest looking among them, Reggie. He thus goes about trying to impress him with favors, drugs, and his ability to literally run the prison.

In the words of the young playwright, Bigsby reinforces his manhood at the expense of others, through the brutality of his fists, an elaborate dope peddling operation (sanctioned and perpetuated by the prison guard), and through a thoroughly debilitating scheme to force Reggie into homosexuality. But Reggie is unaware of the cruel fate awaiting him. In his mind, his brass medallion is a symbol of manhood. His childhood girlfriend, Sheila, rewarded him with it when he and his best friend, Leroy Jackson, fought for her affection and Reggie won. He was declared The Man and Leroy The Punk.

To Speechless, the stuttering comic of an inmate, manhood is his father incar-

nate . . . "m-m-y father c-c-an whip some . . . some a—and h-he's got p-plenty women," he stutters in one scene.

To Preach, the respected and envied university professor in prison on a trumped-up charge of attempted rape, manhood is merely a state of being . . . it *is* . . . because *you* are. He tells Reggie that manhood cannot be measured by the extent of a man's ability to overcome another through physical force or by the extent of his bravery or fears.

"You think *men* don't have fears. The question is whether we allow our fears to rule us or we rule them . . . and that is never a question of manhood but a question of *human* integrity," he says.

Thus the play delves deeply into the myths surrounding the traditionally idealistic, unrealistic definition of manhood, and further transcends this issue with a message on humanity as well.

According to Ajamu (also known as Robert Crawford), it is an attempt to steer the audience from the John Wayne values which dictate that you are a better person because of your ability to stay on top, or that your insensitivity, anti-intellectuality and brutal tendencies make you more of a man than one who is sensitive, intellectually inclined and sincere.

Ajama says his play speaks out against the system that encourages aggression and violence and then forbids the acting out of these emotions.

Thus Reggie's symbolic brass medallion represents a yoke, a weight which demands that his characters prove themselves daily by acting out their aggressions on each other.

Reggie, who was once the smartest student in his junior high school, would like to forget this part of his past. Instead, he prefers to boast of the time he robbed the neighborhood store. He admires Bigsby for his armed-robbery conviction and his magnetism with the inmates and even the guards. "Man, you run everybody around here don't you?" Reggie asks Bigsby in one scene.

The part of Reggie reveals the humor

and sensitivity of the playwright and the acting ability of Nobel Lester, who portrays Reggie. In one humorous scene, Reggie tells Speechless he must "act like he's a man" (even if he is still a virgin). He proceeds to show him how. His broad shoulders, flexed muscles and exaggerated demeanor impress Speechless and almost send the audience into hysterical laughter.

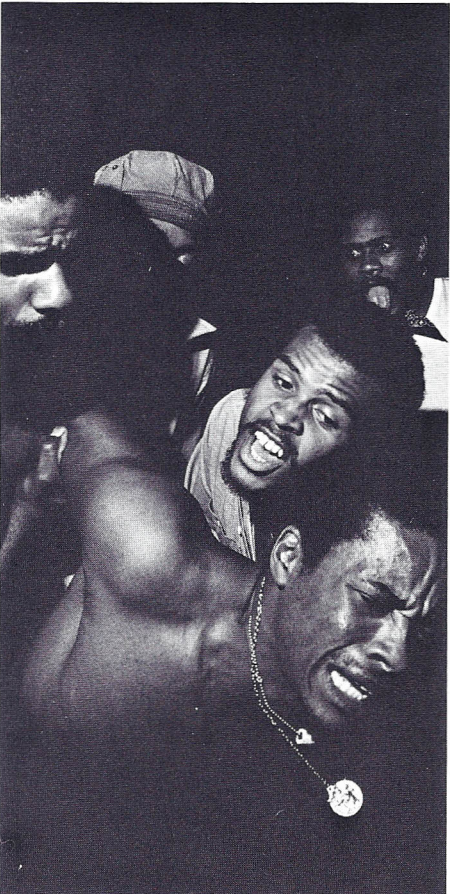
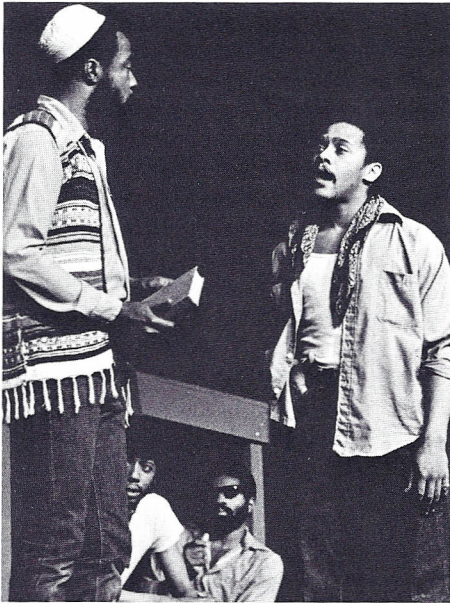
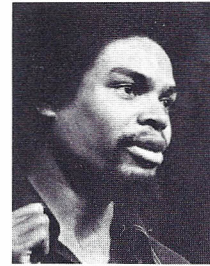
Speechless is by no means lacking in humor and acting ability with his stuttering, exaggerated speech. But more important, he immediately perceives Bigsby's true character . . . "Something about him ain't right man," he tells Reggie in one scene. He reveals depth of character and keenness of insight for one who appears to be a weakling.

Speechless also accurately perceives that Preach can help him answer many of the questions in his mind about his development into manhood. As the play progresses, his appreciation of Preach's unusual insight into the problems of his fellow inmates and of Black people in general increases. Simultaneously, Reggie's distrust of Preach and his desire to lessen Preach's influence also increases. Finally, he urges Bigsby to confront Preach in an intellectual debate.

Bigsby sees this as one last chance to win Reggie's confidence.

In what is a very soft, unsuspecting lead-in to the play's climax, Speechless, now noticeably stuttering less, asks Preach to tell him about Congolese political leader Patrice Lumumba, the subject of the book Preach is reading. Preach begins to relate the story of Lumumba's life and his assassination at the hands of his countrymen. Bigsby quickly comes to their defense claiming that they were pawns in the hands of the European and Western power structure. Preach counters that Lumumba was the victim of his Black brothers' thirst for power and their own weaknesses.

"They were used because they allowed themselves to be used," Preach argues.



The scene is tense, powerful and provocative as the actors' tones rise with conviction.

To Reggie's disappointment, Bigsby uses the ultimate means to solve the dispute—his fists.

Bigsby is clearly frustrated by the outcome of the debate with Preach. He is also angered by the knowledge that an informer is revealing his drug activities to the warden. Shortly, the rape of Reggie in the shower by Bigsby's partners follows. But before Bigsby gets his turn, the guards and an enraged Preach intervene. This scene is handled with a remarkable insight into the sense of turmoil and deeply imbedded self-hatred which prevails in the oppressive atmosphere of the world in which the inmates live. Other scenes dramatize the rage, mixed with indignation, humiliation and despair which daily haunts the victims.

Reggie's cries, piercing the silence of the theatre on opening night, were not only the cries of Reggie but the cries of all helpless victims in this society who find themselves constantly robbed of all the things that humanize them. But like Reggie, who continuously seeks revenge after being raped, these victims are unwilling to accept defeat, repeatedly returning to the scene of their own torment.

As the play nears its end, Preach decides that he will become an informer in order to end Bigsby's influence on the inmates. He does this despite his belief that Bigsby is a direct product of a degenerate society with few legitimate alternatives to Bigsby's headlong plunge toward self destruction.

His decision seems justified by the eventual death of Reggie at the hands of Bigsby.

Near the end, Reggie realizes that his unconscious and sometimes deliberate desire to prove his manhood has availed him nothing. Of his manhood, he ponders: "It was with me all the time . . . I was born with it . . . there was nothing to figure out . . ." □

The Playwright

Ajamu, 23, is a senior in the School of Communications, majoring in television and film and minoring in playwriting. He is a member of the John Oliver Killens Literary Guild, a society of creative professional and upcoming artists. Formerly a political science and history major, Ajamu only recently became interested in communications and in drama as mediums of expression.

Of "The Brass Medallion," he says, "I am addressing the issues of oppression and unrealistic value systems on a racial as well as on individual level."

Born Robert Crawford in Philadelphia, Pa., Ajamu recalls that when he was younger he and his friends often ridiculed their classmates who received awards for intellectual achievement. "Becoming an intellectual was equated with becoming more white," he says.

"The Brass Medallion" has been entered into the American Theatre College Festival Competition, a regional competition in which some 14 schools participate annually. This is the first year that Howard has entered in the category of recently written plays. Previously, the university entered in other categories, including best production of a play.

Ajamu's screenplay, "Take Back Your Mind," won the Owen Dodson Weenie Award in 1974. The award is presented annually in several categories, including best actor, and best production. □

THE CENTRAL CHARACTERS

- Preach**, Clarence F. Jarmon, senior
- Bigsby**, Johnny Willis, senior
- Reggie**, Nobel Lester, junior
- Speechless**, Gregory Holtz, junior
- Tatum**, Kent Jackman, freshman

Directed by **St. Clair Christmas**, assistant professor, Department of Drama.
