

The Ashfield News

AN ALL-VOLUNTEER NON-PROFIT MONTHLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1976 VOL XLIII NO 12 DECEMBER 2019 FREE TO RESIDENTS



SUGA: A Review and a View into the Soul of Travis Coe

BY NAN PARATI

I always wanted to see Travis Coe naked, and now I have! In all possible ways.

Travis Coe is magic. I've seen him in four Double Edge productions now, and every time I am struck by three things:

1 That guy is nothing but muscle and sinew. He has to be for all of the effortless action he provides, climbing around any production he's in. (So, I always wanted to see what he was actually built of, as there seemed nothing there that might be recognizable in a mere human body.)

2 That guy is fast! Truly, one second he is in the ceiling, and the next literal moment, he is rising beneath a fluttering parachute on the floor. (So, I always wanted to see how an actual living human being could do that.)

3 As an actor he's good, good, good. I've wanted to find out who he was, where he came from and what fuels his inner drive.

Now, with the Double Edge premiere of Travis' one-man show, SUGA I've seen everything and more.

The show opens with Travis sleeping, dreaming on the floor of the stage, clad only in what one theater-goer named a loin cloth, his recorded voice-over telling us that, when he was little, his mother told her children that they could be any color flower in the world they wanted to be, and little Travis' choice was "I want to be the colors of ALL the flowers!" And that young-age declaration propelled him down the road to becoming just that.

From there we are taken on a full-breath, all-out interpretation of a man nakedly portraying his deep past, his history, his ancestry, his ambition, his hopes, his dreams, his influences, his life, with the intention of, not only introducing himself to us, but with the express question, "What does true freedom look like?" asked, designed, answered and defined throughout.

Travis Coe grew up between living with his mother in New Jersey and his father in Florida. His first creative interest in life was dance, though he recognized at a very early age that dancing would probably not be happily accepted by the males of his family. Inspired by theater, reading, watching hours and hours of videos, along with the external axiom that "real work doesn't start until one is in his 30s," he knew in high school that he needed to go away to boarding school in order to free himself, find out exactly who he was and what he wanted to do. And what he found flourishing inside himself was an Afro-Latino-Queer-American Theater and Film Artist, with some Arab roots thrown in as well, who liked to dance and who could take that dance and explode it into very physical theater.

At Michigan's Interlochen Arts Academy he studied film and theater and the Travis who stands before us today began building itself there. He went on to start his own theater company, Unexpected Laboratory, at age 18. He and his business partner, Joe Hill, later re-shaped it into a creative production company called Round Room Images, and they have since toured in more than 22 countries within the last seven years.

Travis Coe doesn't mess around.

He came to Double Edge in 2016 as the Administrative Enrollment Intern, here to do a job. He was to enroll people in Double Edge's training program, a very serious job that would allow him at the same time a place to live and a studio to work privately on his art. At the time, he wasn't a part of the Double Edge company, he was the Enrollment Intern. (When he told me that over a lunch interview at the Lake House, I laughed, "You're Travis!" I remembered him coming to work there, but as a serious young man with a serious job, not as an actor, and I had never married the two Traverses in my brain!)

That year he agreed to trade help with the season's Summer Spectacle, *Once a Blue Moon*, in exchange for mentorship and a look

into the workings of an alternative model of theater-making and survival in exchange for some input from Stacy on what he was working on privately in their studio. Stacy and Carlos watched him work and were impressed. "You really understand training!" she told him, and not long after, the ensemble invited him to join the company itself. Travis is now an associate ensemble member who has created roles in all the productions in the last three years, including *We the People*, *Leonora & Alejandro* and most recently *Leonora's World*.

But he wanted to do his own piece, a piece that would not only show who he is becoming, but ask the question, "What does true freedom look like?"

With religious influence on both sides of his family, Travis read and was heavily influenced by James Baldwin's "The Amen Corner," a play that takes on some of the very themes Travis was wrestling with: the role of the church in an African-American family, and the effect of poverty born of racial prejudice on an African-American community. In creating SUGA Travis and Stacy also explored Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room" and in both of those pieces Travis found art that is "meaty, exquisite, beautiful, bloody, and full of grace." Baldwin, too, was gay—something Travis had not yet explored about himself in high school, but would begin to quietly recognize as part of his soul, later, in college.

Baldwin's voice is heard throughout SUGA, as are other voices of those who have influenced Travis in his twenty-five years, the voices that built him, guided him, told him where to turn and where to stay on the path as he finds his road to true freedom. Those recorded voices we hear in Travis' head are nearly the only words spoken in the show. Someone described the performance to me before I saw it as "breathy."

And in our interview, Travis described it exactly as that. He was breathing. He wanted to breathe life into the piece, to inhale what it is he is learning, to exhale what should be discarded, to bring the audience with him into that living experience.

Without many words in SUGA there is theater, physical theater, symbolic theater,

where every piece of wood, fiber, fabric, iron and plastic on the stage takes the transformational journey with him, transcending from their original stage-prop uses as symbols of oppression to figures of freedom. A bed goes from being a bed, to symbolic desire, to a jail cell, to wings as it dances with Travis from the ground, through the air (literally!) and back again. Two half-mannequins on the stage become props, people, lovers, influences, pedestals and launch pads.

To the props, Travis says, "Despite what you were created for, you can be anything you want to be!" In our interview he explained his wordless message as, "We are all given a promissory note in life to freedom and justice and the world you want to live in. Get your ass up and claim it!"

The show isn't for everyone. While I think every young, aspiring person (especially artists) should see it, if you take children you'll have a lot of explaining to do. While Travis is never fully physically naked on stage, there is a simulated sex scene that would bring up a number of questions for the uninitiated.

And even for very grown folks, I was happy for the post-show discussion that explained a few things to me that had flown high above my lofty head. While the printed program carried an artist's statement, I think one that might give a little more information on some of the landmarks we'll be visiting in the next 42 minutes might be helpful as we take flight with Travis.

I want to see Travis in twenty years and find out where he's flown from here. Happily, his obligatory drug-and-drink years are well behind him so that he can use that brain to climb, skillfully, artfully, brilliantly to the top of his sparking and genius career. Keep on going, Travis! You are one to watch!

SUGA is a solo performance conceived, created and performed by Travis Coe. Direction and overall design by Stacy Klein with John Peitso (Sound), Tadea Klein (Costume), Michal Kuriata (Figures), and Milena Dabova (Choreography). Produced by Double Edge Theatre and supported by the entire Ensemble & Company.