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"unFRAMED" is Priceless!

By Andrew Martin



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The All For One Theater Festival, a series of solo shows which ran throughout November at Theatre 80 St Marks, is one of those events that prove in lush detail, that theatrical innovation will never die. Governed by an Advisory Board of renowned solo entertainers (among them Jackie Mason, Jackie Hoffman, Gretchen Cryer, Tovah Feldshuh, Mark Rylance, Deb Margolin and Leslie Jordan), this year's proceedings included such award-winning shows as Mary Dimino's *Scared Skinny* and *Over There* by PJ Walsh. But perhaps the best of the best was *unFRAMED*, by Iyaba Ibo Mandingo and directed by Brent Buell. Over the course of these ninety riveting minutes of sheer lightning, the gentleman manages to sing, to dance and to act in a variety of ages and accents, and also tell his acclaimed spoken-word poetry and to captivate from his very first nanosecond on stage. As if none of this was enough, he manages to paint a self-portrait right before our eyes.

Mandingo was born Kenny Athel George DeCruise, and his story begins with his boyhood in Antigua. A very happy and closely-knit family life amongst the tropical beauty of the island, included Saturday morning doses of health tonics from his grandmother and making mischief in the local marketplace. But he soon finds himself living in the cold, cruel world of the American inner-city. A poor self-image and the physical absence of his father most certainly didn't help matters, But it is testament to Mandingo's determination to never fall into becoming a typical statistic, and the narrative emerges absolutely triumphant. Such poems as "Mommy Me No Wanna Go Merrica" and "Forty-One Times," are absolutely breathtaking. But more than all of this is Mandingo's ability to transcend color and race; this is not a Black show nor a White show, but a Human show of the highest order. It has moments that are terrifyingly gritty, but though occasionally uncomfortable, is never unwatchable.

Where *unFRAMED* will go from here is anybody's guess; by all rights it should most certainly tour the country at the very least, or end up as TV special, at most. But one thing is certain, Iyaba Ibo Mandingo is most certainly a name that will live in much-deserved infamy where theatre and performance art are concerned. Whether or not the show returns to New York any time soon, this gentleman is a sensational talent that should be seen and savored wherever he next appears.