

Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South



Dr. E. Patrick Johnson in character in "Sweet Tea."



Northwestern Professor Dr. E. Patrick Johnson has won acclaim for his books and plays.

When Dr. E. Patrick Johnson performs his one-man show "Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South" at this year's NBTF, it will be a homecoming of sorts. The talented actor/professor/author/playwright is from Hickory, about 50 miles down Interstate 40 from Winston-Salem. Surely, his success is making his hometown proud.

When he is not teaching classes as the Carlos Montezuma Professor of Performance Studies and African-American Studies at Northwestern University, he is lecturing or performing his acclaimed plays around the globe.

In "Sweet Tea," presented by Chicago's Project&, Johnson shares the stories – some funny, some poignant, some a combination of both – of dozens of Southern gay black men. The play sprung from his book "Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South – An Oral History," in which he profiled 63 gents.

"I was just so amazed that no one had collected these stories," Johnson told *The Chronicle* in 2013, when he performed an early iteration of the play called "Pouring Tea" at Wake Forest University. "I was thinking that if I had heard these stories like this, I may not have struggled as much as I did in coming to terms with my sexuality, because I thought I was the only one."

The book has sold upward of 10,000 copies, while the play based on it has been performed hundreds of times. On stage, Johnson plays a slew of characters, weaving together a complex, highly entertaining show that explores the complexities of race and sexuality. The play has been an ever-evolving work-in-progress ever since Johnson debuted it in 2010.

"We've had various permutations of the show and it has really grown," Johnson told the *Windy City Times* in May. "One of the ways that it has grown is that my own story as a gay Black man has framed the play now, such that my story is sort of the conceit of the show."

Sugar, the signature ingredient for Southern tea, has also become a constant, unseen tableau, Johnson said.

"In this version, *sugar* takes on a more symbolic role, connecting to all the different ways that sugar is connected to African-Americans in this country, from historically working on sugar cane plantations to sugar being a part of folklore," said Johnson, who is now working on the book "Honey Pot," a collection of profiles of Southern black lesbians. "Also *sugar* being a euphemism for diabetes, which also plagues African-American communities, to *sugar* being part of all of the rituals that happen in the play. It's not sugar for sugar's sake, it is *sugar with a purpose* – and of course some of the terms that are used to describe gay people like 'sugar in the tank.'" ■

**Sweet Tea:
Black Gay Men
of the South**

**Mountcastle
Forum Black Box
Theatre at Milton
Rhodes Center**

Tues, Aug. 4	8 p.m.
Wed, Aug. 5	3 p.m.
Wed, Aug. 5	8 p.m.
Thurs, Aug. 6	8 p.m.

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