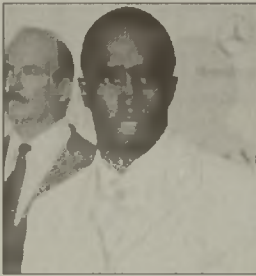


## P. Diddy sheds rap for 'Raisin In Sun'



P. Diddy

By Nekesa Mumbi Moody  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — A day of long rehearsals for a revival of "A Raisin in the Sun" have come to an end, and only one actor remains in the room: Sean Combs.

Combs, tired and drained, sits by a wooden table that is part of the bare-bones, makeshift set in a rehearsal room at Radio City Music Hall. All traces of the hip-hop mogul are gone — he's without his typical diamond stud earrings, blinding watch and other remnants of bling-bling nation, and his suit looks more Kmart than Versace. Only the "God's Child" tattoo on his neck, peeking from behind his white shirt, reminds us of the rap impresario.

And, around here, he's called by his first name — no "P. Diddy" or "Puffy," please.

Combs could very well be Walter Lee Younger — the frustrated, struggling father at the center of Lorraine Hansberry's celebrated play about family, class and race. When it first debuted in 1959, the groundbreaking drama starred Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Claudia McNeil and Diana Sands.

Yet Combs will have to do much more than merely look the part when he makes his debut at the Royale Theater alongside Tony winner Audra McDonald, Phylicia Rashad and Sanaa Lathan. Now in previews, the play opens April 26.

Combs falls under an enormous shadow: He has stepped into the role that won Poitier a Tony nomination (he lost to Melyyn Douglas for "The Best Man") and critical acclaim when Poitier starred in the 1961 movie with the same cast.

For Combs, it will not only be his Broadway debut but his first stage role — his brief acting career has included minor parts in the movies

"Monster's Ball" and "Made." Although he has had enormous success as a rapper, producer, record label executive, clothing designer and even marathon runner, his theatrical talent has been untested.

And he knows it. "This is definitely a huge undertaking. It's something that has been the hardest thing I've ever done — even harder than the marathon," Combs says quietly. "At this point of my life, it's one of the scariest things I've ever done because it's so intense, it's so emotional, it's so hard."

But despite Combs' inexperience, director Kenny Leon says he couldn't think of any other actor better suited to play the role.

"I want somebody who can make me believe the three-dimensional quality to Walter Lee," Leon, former head of the Alliance Theatre Company in Atlanta, says. "Walter Lee is a man who has his good side and his bad side and his wrinkles and his warts and his smooth side. He's a smart man, he's an intelligent man — he's not just an angry black man. ... Sean has crafted a Walter Lee that allows you to understand the man."

While Combs is aware of the play's importance, he had never seen the movie version and failed to complete an assigned reading of the play when he was a teenager.

"I was supposed to read the book back in high school but I never read the book. I did the Cliff Notes," he says, referring to the abbreviated synopsis series popular with some students.

"I couldn't do the Cliff Notes for the play though," he says with a laugh.

His name became attached to the revival of "Raisin" when his acting coach encouraged him to audition: "I didn't think that I would really get the part, though."

Leon says Combs was not only cast because of the strength of his acting, but because he would bring a new demographic to Broadway: young hip-hop fans who may not have ever seen a theater production before. Combs himself is not a theatergoer, having seen few plays in his life.

"My goal is to create the best possible production of this play in America, and at

the same time, bring as a diverse an audience to this play as I can, so I think Broadway needs to be diversified," Leon says.

Although celebrities with little-to-no stage experience have been lured to Broadway to help a sagging box office, choosing Combs to take on such a revered role has sparked plenty of skepticism and outrage. Actor Omar Epps, best known for films including "Love & Basketball," derided Combs' casting, calling it a "stupid choice" in a recent New York Daily News article. Others have complained that Combs was chosen despite a wealth of black actors who have difficulty getting work.

Actor Anthony Mackie, currently on Broadway in the critically panned "Drowning Crow," was quoted in a column on theatermania.com, saying, "Casting a rapper like P. Diddy, Puff Daddy, Mr. Runner, or whatever he calls himself, shows a great lack of respect to the African-American community by the African-American community."

Combs is aware of all the criticism, and even thinks that some of it is justified. "There are so many qualified actors that are out there that could have been chosen for the role," he says, acknowledging that many talented black actors are underused.

"That's one of the reasons why ... I work hard. It's definitely out of respect for the craft. I'm not, like, a musician-slash-actor. When I'm doing this I'm an actor."

According to Rashad, Combs has become a formidable actor. Rashad starred on Broadway in "Jelly's Last Jam" and "The Wiz" but is best known for her work as Bill Cosby's wife in the long-running TV series "The Cosby Show." She says that Combs has approached the work with a reverence, diligence and respect that has impressed his co-workers.

"He puts himself into the work completely — and I mean completely, for 24 hours a day. No matter what else he's doing, his mind is engaged in this work," Rashad says. "I've worked with some of the best, experienced actors who don't work that way. He's very intelligent. And he's intelligent enough to know that theater

is not easy."

Still, Combs was unprepared for how rigorous the role would be.

"It's been a total change of life for me — to be rehearsing, in rehearsals 10, 12 hours a day. (I'm) not able to use a phone — I'm a cell phoneaholic — not able to party, not able to see my friends, family, be hands on as much with some of my businesses."

There was a report that Combs was not up to the challenge. The New York Post's Page Six quoted unidentified sources that he had not yet learned his lines when rehearsals started.

"This guy was the first person in the cast to know all of his lines, and that was like after a couple of days," Leon says about the allegation. "That's totally a lie. He's been committed and prepared every day from day one, and he's been on time and prepared and way ahead of what he's supposed to be."

But no matter how prepared he is, will the omnipresent celebrity, whose wealth has become a defining characteristic of his life, be able to convince audience members that he is a poor, struggling father whose inability to provide for his family is eating away at his soul?

Combs believes he can and despite his usual bravado, he's surprisingly noncommittal when asked whether he'll deliver.

"I'm like you: The suspense is building to opening night to see how it's going to be," he says. "One thing I know is I'm always going to do my best."

For Rashad, though, "best" has proven to be more than enough.

"When you see him you will not say he's inexperienced. ... He delivers this person to you," she says.

"I think that any actor who understands Walter Lee — who understands what motivates him, who understands this — is the actor that you want to have. And it turns out that he understands this."

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## BET provides risque 'exposure'

Continued from page 10B

clubber who had a stripper pole built into his house — has been taken aback by some of the content.

"Some of it is getting really distasteful — it's like giving it a bad taste, it's really exploiting women," he says. "What they're doing now it's kind of like soft porn. I saw some (stuff) the other day. ... I didn't even know they could do that on TV."

The show started in September 2000, and airs Wednesday through Friday at 3 a.m. Eastern time.

Stephen Hill, a senior vice president for BET, said "Uncut" is for adult eyes only — a disclaimer runs before the naughty videos air. "Any kid up at 3 o'clock in the morning, their biggest problem is not BET," he said.

Hill insists that "nothing that we run on 'Uncut' is not seen in prime-time television." There is plenty of blurred nudity on regular television today, from CBS' "Survivor" to MTV, which has even shown naked couples licking whipped cream off each other.

Typically, though, such content is not presented in such a raw fashion.

"BET just gets more of a rap for it because critics focus more of their attention on BET," Hill says.

But Stewart complains that uncensored videos promote negative stereotypes.

"I don't think there should be necessarily be censorship of the images of women, but it's an extremely one-sided look at women. There's no other images to counteract it," she says. "I can't tell you the last video I saw where a black woman had a job, and that's really more our experience than black women being strippers."

More is on the way — the Playboy network started their "Buckwild" show this year. Hosted by Ken "Buckwild" Francis, it plays uncensored videos with full nudity in between saucy segments with various hip-hop artists.

"There's always a demand to get anything without censorship," says Francis, who also produces his own line of "Buckwild" videos, sort of like a black "Girls Gone Wild." "When you put a blur there, you create a demand,

because people are nosy by nature."

And the Playboy network plans to start a block of hip-hop programming called "H.Y.P.E." later this year, as a precursor for a network of the same name (Universal Music Group was reported to be starting its own uncensored music video network, but a spokeswoman called that premature).

"If you're 21 years old, you're ready to see the videos the way they were meant to be," says Tracy Lawrence, president of H.Y.P.E. TV. "You don't need to have them edited like they are for outlets where they have teens watching."

Lloyd Banks of G-Unit, fronted by 50 Cent, says uncensored videos allow the artists to make videos that mirror the content of their lyrics, which typically carry a parental advisory.

"If we were to shoot the 'Groupie Love' video, there would have to be an 'Uncut' video. If you're not thinking of sexual acts, there's something wrong with you," says Banks, who's coming out with an "interactive" porn DVD later this year that allows the viewer to choose what sex acts women do.

Artists have made videos for sexually explicit songs for years. Why are the videos finally catching up?

"People want more. The sex is definitely in the music, and sex is in all aspects in the music," says Campbell.

He credits underground videos like his "Luke's Freak Fest," a popular video series featuring nude women, and Snoo Dogg's foray into hosting porn videos with injecting soft porn into videos.

Whether we'll ever see Britney Spears "Uncut" is doubtful. But BET's channel already has fans among the mainstream set.

R&B hitmaker Usher, who counts himself as a viewer, says he might even consider doing one — but only if it's "tastefully done."

Still, he admits it's a guilty pleasure: "You're kind of in the wrong for even watching it."

"Then what's crazy about it, after it's off, the inspiration of the day comes on," he says, referring to the BET's block of religious programming, which starts at 4 a.m.

## COCA-COLA "TEACHER" OF THE MONTH Anthony Sterling Jones Director of Bands, Harding University High School



### Why Education?

"Both of my parents were educators and gave me a solid foundation about how important it was to learn, know and understand the ways of our society. My dad was and still is an excellent role model and he was a strong positive force that young black men needed at that time. My parents encouraged and pushed me to do my best. I try to do the same for my children and the kids coming up now. I set the bar high and take advantage of "University" being in our school's name — I expect/demand more than a "High School" attitude when it comes to

being in Harding's band (I call it A.P. Band). We can't protect them from all of the pitfalls that lie ahead but we can prepare them to strive for the highest when they are in a difficult situation." — Tony Jones

Our "Teacher of the Month," Anthony Sterling Jones, most affectionately known as "Tony" is living proof that: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. Galatians 6:7. His 17 year commitment to not only helping students reach their highest potential, but providing a means by which to do it, was acknowledged by former mayor, Richard Vinroot, when he proclaimed June 4, 1994 "Anthony Sterling Jones Day." The outstanding band program at Harding University High School receives rave reviews far beyond the city of Charlotte. They receive invitations to perform for many parades and special occasions.

Away from school, Tony continues his mission by hosting summer band programs for beginners, marching, jazz and drum line band students. His next camp is scheduled for June 28-July 2. It doesn't stop there. To stay on top of the times Tony has his own group, Sterling's Jazz Quintet, is a member of A Sign of the Times Big Band, is founder of Stetson Records & Productions, has 2 CD's out, "Christmas with Sterling" and "I Surrender All," and is currently performing with Chill Factor at the Big Chill restaurant on Friday and Saturday evenings. And, believe it or not, he still finds time to go fishing, perform magic, play basketball swim and participate in martial arts.

The oldest son born to Clarence and Annie Ruth Jones of Spartanburg, SC, Tony received his BA in Music Education from UNC Greensboro in 1988, and his masters from Winthrop University. He is an accomplished musician on the trumpet, percussion and string bass.

During his career, Tony has taught at Hawthorne Middle School, where he also had a 250 piece marching band, coached football and basketball, and was assistant band director at Johnson C. Smith University from 1991 to 1994.

Tony is married to the lovely Sheila W. Jones, a teacher at University Park Elementary. They are the proud parents of sons Anthony Sterling Jones II, 8, and Brian Stetson Jones, 6. The family attends St. Paul Baptist Church.

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