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Donney Rose: A poet audits American history

BY JOHN WIRT | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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Donney Rose embraces his role as writer and poet. Rose's wife, Leslie, took many of the photos for his 'The American Audit' multi-media performance piece.

PROVIDED PHOTO BY LESLIE D. ROSE

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In his multimedia performance piece “The American Audit,” Baton Rouge poet Donney Rose casts America as a business being audited by black Americans. The accounting begins in 1619, the year slave traders brought Africans to Jamestown, Virginia, England’s first permanent settlement in North America.

“The American Audit” debuts Friday at the Manship Theatre’s Hartley/Vey Studio Theatre. The 55-minute, sold-out presentation combines images and filmed interviews with Rose’s interpretation of 400 years of black history.

Rose conducted trial runs for “The American Audit” by staging excerpts of the piece at a handful of venues, including the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the University of North Iowa and the George and Joyce Wein Heritage Center in New Orleans.

“I was gauging audiences’ reaction,” he said. “Everywhere I’ve gone, the consensus has been people saying they can’t wait until it’s completed and they’d love to see me bring it

back. One guy in New Orleans said, 'I can see this going to Broadway.' That may be a stretch, but I'll take it."

Josh Hamzehee, production coordinator for the UNI Interpreters Theatre at the University of Northern Iowa, is among those who praised Rose's partial "American Audit" performances. He cited him as an "artistic journalist" who provides "a much-needed creative perspective in a time of constant crises."

Rose, 39, has been on the Baton Rouge poetry scene for 20 years. Also a teacher and community organizer, he founded the Black Out Loud Conference in 2018, a three-day annual conference that focuses on the arts, media and activism.

Rose's inspiration for both "The American Audit" and the Black Out Loud Conference includes the troubling summer 2016. On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling, 37, was shot and killed during an altercation with two Baton Rouge police officers. Less than two weeks later, Gavin Long, of Kansas City, Missouri, killed three local law enforcement officers and wounded three others in an ambush.

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“Prior to that time, I was socially conscious, and speaking through my poetry and social media postings,” Rose said. “But in 2016 — whatever I may have said about Michael Brown in Missouri or Sandra Bland in Texas or Tamir Rice in Ohio — this was now in my backyard. My experience with writing, with community organizing and working with young people, all of that came to a place of urgency.”

Realizing that not everyone can be as impactful as such civil rights leaders as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy or John Lewis, Rose embraced his role as writer and poet.

“During that time (the civil rights era), James Baldwin was necessary,” Rose said. “He wasn’t organizing rallies and marches, but he was providing the linguistic context, the nuance in language, for what was happening.”

Having begun work for “The American Audit” a year ago, the past four months have seen Rose hyper-focused on the project. It’s been a busy period of conducting interviews and shaping them and the project’s still photos into a

comprehensive whole. Rose's wife, Leslie, took many of the photos. Steven C. Baham served as videographer, editor and co-producer.

Despite the multiple sclerosis he was diagnosed with in 2014, Rose threw himself into the completion of "The American Audit." He also recently began writing for the website The North Star.

"It's a day-by-day process," Rose said of dealing with multiple sclerosis. "I will do what I need to do to take care of myself, but, having said that, I'm taking on things that are stress-inducing."

Doing meaningful work helps sustain him, Rose said.

"When I'm in pain, sometimes I think about my illness," he said. "But most times I'm thinking about my next piece for The North Star. Or how many places can I bring 'The American Audit.' Or planning for the Black Out Loud 2020 conference. My body is occupied by illness, but my mind is not. I'm trying to produce as many of these dreams as possible."

'The American Audit'

7:30 p.m. Friday
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Hartley/Vey Studio Theatre, Manship Theatre,
100 Lafayette St., North Boulevard entrance

Sold out

manshiptheatre.org; donneyrosepoetry.com