

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Lester Mayers at Unity Church: Artist in Residence

Lia Rivamonte, Beloved Community Communications and Artist in Residence Teams

Lester Eugene Mayers (pronouns: anything that comes from a respectful place) will be Unity's Artist in Residence through November. He is a poet, playwright, actor, director, and performance artist. During his residency, Lester will contribute to the commUNITY newsletter, participate in worship services, and conduct a Wellspring Wednesday learning session. His residency will culminate in an original performance work of music, movement, and spoken word presented at Unity in November. Say "Hey" to the artist if you see him in the hallway — his dynamic presence will be unmistakable.

"They say in the beginning was the word, and the word was god and I thought if god won't listen, I'd hope he'd read."

Those are the first words of Lester's performance work, "Poems From a Shelter," produced by the Ambience Theatre Company at Dreamland Arts in St. Paul in July. Words are the architecture for Lester's art, and serves as the main medium for his visceral, unvarnished, yet luscious revelatory work. A choreopoem (defined by Lester as "the language, the text within music, and the physical dance accompanying it into one room"), "Poems From a Shelter," was written, directed, and performed by the artist. It takes place overnight in a homeless shelter, and consists of nine poems interspersed with statistical information about queer Black people who are homeless.

Homelessness is a situation he has known many times over in the course of his life. As Lester has said, he doesn't write from distance. "I live or have lived everything I write about — and when I get up on that stage, I relive everything but trust the word to bring me back."

As a boy growing up in Brooklyn, New York, Lester, parentless and unschooled until age seven, did not speak, much less read. But a teacher took him under her wing and taught him how to read and write by word association. She read him a poem by Maya Angelou, he told me, and together they sounded out each letter, each word, and discussed it. Through that practice and the memorization of poems, he learned to love language. Since that early time, Angelou has continued to be a source of inspiration.

Poems come to him when he does as the sage poet instructed: *Close your eyes, sit still, and listen.* Lester's writing comes from deeply listening to himself, and the world around him, with an implicit trust that words — specifically the Black vernacular that is at the root of his work — will express what he feels, what he knows to be true.

Lester's gift with words, and his consummate performance skills have brought him accolades, awards, and many exciting opportunities. He is in Minnesota as a Playwrights' Center Many Voices Fellow, and will soon be serving as Assistant Director at The Guthrie for "Sally & Tom," the premiere of a new play by Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks, opening October 1. *SoMad* in New York City will produce his solo work, "Mark My Words," in November.

Sapphire, the author of "Push," has written the foreword for Lester's play, "Swallow From Both Ends," to be published in February. It is the first piece he has written exclusively for theater. Even so, Lester professed frustration that no one, thus far, has said they will produce the play. "Theaters," he said, "are limited by the 'taste purveyors.' The play is too real," he continued, "I've been told that it's beautiful but because it's written from the queer Black gaze, and in Black vernacular, there's no way in. I say it's because their (mainstream theater producers) own pedagogy doesn't give them a way in — there is no way for others to engage."

"Where are the spaces that we can carve for ourselves without asking permission?" he asked rhetorically. Bristling, he referred to James Baldwin's question, "How much time do you want



for your progress?" (James Baldwin: *The Price of the Ticket*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCUIE5ldPvM) In the meantime, he said, "I will keep producing with the resources I can find."

Lester thinks a lot about something else Baldwin has said as impetus for his own work, "An artist is not free to do what they want to do, but free to do what they have to do." When asked when he first knew he was an artist, Lester responded, "When did I know I was Black?"

This unassailable connection between one's identity and the creative process is illuminated in Baldwin's 1962 essay, *The Creative Process*, "An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are. He has to tell, because nobody else in the world can tell, what it is like to be alive." (*The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1945-1985*)

"Poems From a Shelter" ends with a prayer: "Dear god, send me you by my own definition, a poem that can walk on water, turn itself into wine, and then a teacher, that can learn me to see that I've been loved all along."

Watch for opportunities to experience Lester's work, and keep listening.