UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

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Jim Logan

The Countdown Is On

Idris Goodwin is no stranger to the spotlight. A spoken-word artist, playwright, rapper and writer, he knows how to command a stage. But the biggest production of his career is just around the corner. His play, "We Want the Funk: A Rustbelt Lullaby on the One!" will preview Thursday, May 19, at 7:30 p.m. in Hatlen Theater at UC Santa Barbara.

Set in the early 1970s, it features a laid-off autoworker with big dreams and a belief in "the funk." A production of UCSB's Department of Theater and Dance LAUNCH PAD program, "We Want the Funk" is a fully staged work with professional and student actors and offers Goodwin the opportunity to develop, write and hone an original play.

Goodwin, who is in residence at UCSB, is deeply connected to hip hop and its rhythm and lyricism. One of his first plays, "How We Got On," featured three teens coming of age in the early days of hip hop. "We Want the Funk," though, takes him into new territory and allows him to stretch his ambitions and vision.

"It's a play I always wanted to write, one that I've been interested in for a long time," said Goodwin, who is based in Colorado. "Hip hop is such a big part of me. Those other plays were easier for me to write, while this one is a bigger scale, bigger scope, not necessarily my era, and so it seemed like the perfect thing to try out."

Risa Brainin, LAUNCH PAD's artistic director and professor and chair of the Department of Theater and Dance, met Goodwin at the Colorado New Play Summit,

a showcase of new plays. She instantly liked his work. “For LAUNCH PAD, I’m not just looking for the play, I’m looking for the playwright,” she said. “I look for a writer who wants to have this kind of experience, which is very different than any other, because the whole concept of LAUNCH PAD is to have the opportunity to see the play in three dimensions as you’re continuing to work on it and write it. That’s the fun part.”

For Goodwin, LAUNCH PAD has proved to be a good fit. The extended time to develop the play without the pressures of tight deadlines and impending criticism has given him space and perspective. “That is what’s so rare about this opportunity: to really get to see the event that you envisioned, and be able to sit back and say, ‘Oh, all right,’ ” he said. “As opposed to, ‘The critics are going to tear me apart.’ So that’s a huge boon.”

Goodwin said that he remembers more of what he hears than what he reads. And that’s part of the allure of writing a play, he explained: the audience will hear his words and the “sonic quality” of the life and rhythm behind them. “I’m pretty aurally inclined and I like language, but I like language and action, the sound of language, the use of language to uplift, to cut down, words as weapons, words to celebrate, different dialects and slang, where they come from. It’s the closest I’ll ever get to composing a symphony.”

That makes Brainin a conductor as well as a director. “It’s beautifully written and we’re trying to feel what that rhythm is,” she said. “What Idris has written is not meant to be in a kind of verse that you recognize. You will feel it more than you hear it, in a way.”

As a LAUNCH PAD work, “We Want the Funk” is staged each night as a “preview production,” meaning every performance lets Goodwin work on the play while it’s being performed in front of an audience. “What was great about doing it here, specifically, is that it allowed me to just keep adding,” he said. “I think typically when you’re writing a play you start thinking practically, which can sometimes be the enemy of art — too many people! I could just keep going and going and going, and it was boundless. Even after the first script, once we got a cast in I added more parts. I had a feeling that this was the right play for this particular program. I think it’s worked out really well.”

Additional performances will take place at 7:30 p.m. on May 20, 21 and 25-27, and at 2 p.m. on May 22. Tickets are $17 general, and $13 for UCSB students, faculty

and staff members, alumni and seniors.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.