

Comedian probes past – possible fatherhood – in touching one-man show

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Sometimes, a phone call can change a life; it can be a disruptive force that rips apart everything you thought you knew about yourself and make you revisit the pain of your past.

That's what happened to comedian Ralph Harris, best known for his role as Josh Jerrico on ABC's "On Our Own," when he got a call from an old girlfriend, who told him he might have a 17-year-old son.



The news threw Harris into a tailspin and he returned his hometown of Philadelphia to take a paternity test and confront his fears about possibly becoming a father and his unresolved feelings toward his own father.

The story of his journey – to Philadelphia and through his childhood – form the foundation for his one-man show, "MANish Boy," which premiered Friday afternoon at the Hamlin Theatre at the Benton Convention Center as part of the National Black Theatre Festival.

Ralph Harris is told he is possibly the father of a 17-year-old boy who is in trouble during his play "MANish BOY" at the 2013 National Black Theatre Festival at the Hamlin Theatre at the Benton Convention Center

The set is simple, talking place largely in the basement of his childhood home, his father's old red recliner in the center and a wooden desk to the side. In the back of the stage is a coat hanger.

Harris smoothly switches into a number of characters from his childhood, including his teenage self and his 94-year-old grandfather as well as one of his mother's best girlfriends. None of those characters is a caricature. He makes them real, with a respect to their humanity that shines through.

Harris is a hilarious performer, keeping the audiences in stitches, but he also brought them to the verge of tears at some points through his many characters and as he struggled with his conflicted feelings about fatherhood and his father. His father left when Harris was 7, leaving Harris to be man of the house.

The result is a sometimes emotional, oftentimes funny journey of a man trying to figure it all out. And if you're wondering whether he is, Maury Povich-style, indeed the father, well, you'll have to see the show. mhewlett@wsjournal.com

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