

Review: Antonio's Song: I Was Dreaming of a Son at Contemporary American Theater Festival

by

Antonio's Song is a masterful collaboration between two distinguished artists—some may remember Dael Orlandersmith's emotionally charged *Yellowman* that tore through Washington D.C. some years ago, or her *Stoop Stories*. Her lyrical language and raw emotional style blend perfectly with the basic story of co-writer Antonio Edwards Suarez in *Antonio's Song: I Was Dreaming of a Son*.

The intimacy of the setting in Studio 112, the unrelenting honesty of Suarez as he shares their reflections and the lyrical choreopoem style blend with the jazzy bopping music for an engaging experience at this year's Contemporary American Theater Festival.



Antonio Edwards Suarez in *Antonio's Song: I Was Dreaming of a Son* at Contemporary American Theater Festival
(Photo: Seth Freeman)

The show opens as Antonio, (played by Antonio Edwards Suarez) tenderly cares for his five year old son, on unanticipated Dad duty at the worst time for his studio work. From the beginning, Suarez captures the conflicting emotions of the moment with heartfelt clarity. He adores his son, but he's in a time crunch developing his movement art piece, and spirals into frustration, anger, then rage, then suddenly pow! he unleashes a torrent of horrible language and physical violence, a clenched fist threatening the cowering youngster. He looks at his hands wondering, how did that happen? Where did that come from?

From there, *Antonio's Song* zooms back to the artist's own chilling childhood of hanging with buds, being caught between 'Rican friends on one side with their Latin idioms and slang, and the same message as spoken by his black friends. He and his sister Pinky somehow cross between the two cultures dodging, bobbing and weaving out of mayhem

and mischief. But the darkness resides at home, with a mother who knocks him to kingdom come for no reason, no provocation, just because she can, and a father who lets it happen.

The language is strong, the music pervasive, and the segments are bare-knuckled intense. Suarez is captivating in showing and sharing the progressive scenes and director Mark Clements assures and maintains a deeply rooted integrity to match the Antonio's intensity. Just when you think he'll sink in the mire around him, he finds a tiny light to drift towards—a caring friend who urges him to be himself, a teacher who nudges him towards graduation, even watching footage of Rudolph Nureyev, then Baryshnikov his beloved "Misha" all help to keep the tiny spark of creativity and hope alive despite the torrential abuse mainly from his mother that could easily douse the flickering flame.



Antonio Edwards Suarez in *Antonio's Song: I Was Dreaming of a Son* at Contemporary American Theater Festival
(Photo: Seth Freeman)

Lighting (John Ambrosone) nearly becomes a character itself with a spotlight on each side of the stage representing Antonio's allegiance to the duo cultures of his heritage with an African American father and Puerto Rican mother. At one point a fiendish darkened glow tinges the performer in splatters of wounded maroon shades. A round platform near centerstage serves as seating and elevation. The incredible projections by Jared Mezzocchi place us in a NY concrete tenement, amidst ancient paneling at Harvard or floating dreamingly in the clouds.

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Entertaining and unsettling, this world premiere covers race, culture, masculinity, role of fathers, and generational impact of abuse in its massive scope of issues. Whole sections seem threadbare giving the piece a workshop. For example, his father finally embraces Antonio nearly cradling him near the show's end, just as Antonio did his own son completing a loving circle. But, there's no hint of Antonio's love journey that produced the child, a significant gap.



Antonio's Song closes July 28, 2019. [Details and tickets](#)

Antonio' Song is a demanding and ambitious work in progress filled with songs and the two artists' utter vulnerability and sharing. Orlandersmith explains the universal power of music to relay emotions and experiences that transcend words, where "songs can zero in on collective unconsciousness" while she excavates and shapes Suarez's sometimes devastating story. The music, language and performance artistry of Antonio's Song provide a guiding light through the dark and painful moments, and watching Antonio transcend his turbulent upbringing and

succeed in life brings hope to all of our songs.

Antonio's Song: I Was Dreaming of a Son by Dael Orlandersmith and Antonio Edwards Suarez . Director: Mark Clements . Cast: Antonio Edwards Suarez; Set Design: Luciana Stecconi; Sound Design and Composition: Andre Pluess; Lighting: John Ambrosone; Projections Designer: Jared Mezzocchi; Costume Design: Peggy McKowen; Movement Director/Choreographer: Alexandra Beller; Technical Director: Monique Robine; Production Stage Manager: Lindsay Eberly . Produced by the Contemporary American Theater Festival . Reviewed by Debbie Minter Jackson.