

Ben Vereen revisits signature roles at Raue Center

By: Donald Liebenson | For Sun-Times Media | September 12, 2013

When he isn't wowing audiences, Tony-winning and Emmy-nominated actor and entertainer Ben Vereen gives back to the arts community by teaching students and aspiring theatre professionals about performing. Those in the audience for Vereen's acclaimed one-man show, which he is bringing to the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake Sept. 21, will get a master class.

Vereen describes the show, which he has been touring across the country over the past few years in anticipation of a Broadway run, as a "thank you" to his audiences for the opportunity to perform for them over a career that spans almost 50 years.

The show is a retrospective of his career, in which he revisits signature roles in classic productions and reflects on some of the "remarkable people" who have guided him on his journey, among them Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra and Bob Fosse.

Vereen is an indomitable and enduring presence in the artistic community. Consider just these classic musicals in which he has graced the stage: "Hair," "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Pippin," for which he received Broadway's highest honor, and "Wicked." On television, he made iconic the role of Chicken George in the landmark miniseries, "Roots."

"I've been in business awhile," he laughs.

Ever mindful of spoilers, Vereen is hesitant to talk specifically about the content of the show. But what audiences can expect, he said, is music and stories drawn from his extraordinary career. "It's going to be fun," he said. "They're going to have a good time."

This is a point of honor with Vereen, an old school entertainer who treats every night in the theatre as if it's opening night.

"This is what I try to instill in young people. There may be somebody in the audience who is experiencing the theatre for the first time. They deserve you being at your best."

Vereen credits in part those towering showmen of the Rat Pack for instilling in him his tireless work ethic. Sammy Davis, Jr. was not only a mentor, (Vereen understudied for Davis in "Golden Boy"), he was a role model. "He had such determination and tenacity," Vereen marveled. "He would go on and on because he loved his audiences. That was contagious."

And now Vereen carries that torch. He happily casts himself in the role of mentor to such artists as Usher, his godson. It's a chance "to pass it on," Vereen said.

When he is not performing, Vereen is himself an impassioned proponent of the arts and arts education, especially for children. "We are all art forms," he said. "It says, 'In the beginning God created.' It doesn't say God manufactured. We are creative expressions. Therefore, to cut away the arts is to cut away part of our lives."

Vereen bemoans the budgetary cutbacks in arts education and issues a call to action. "We must support the arts because they support our lives. Kids [exposed to] the arts at a young age are more creative in what they bring to the planet when they are allowed to express it."