

Brooklyn playwright uses theater to push social commentary

By **LESLIE ANN MURRAY**

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"I have been a rebel-rouser all my life," playwright Andre Lancaster said, as he sat on the sofa of BreadStuy Café in Brooklyn, discussing his budding career as a young, Black playwright breaking down the walls of hegemony.

Lancaster, who is an openly gay male, and currently resides in the Black artistic hub of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, is using theater as a medium to convey "non-homophobic" stories about the Black lesbian, gay, bi and transgender (LGBT) community.

Like many artists who knew their artistic aspirations before they could formulate words, Lancaster knew his mission in life, and at 17 he created one of his first plays, entitled "Insects of an Assorted Nature," where he explored the environmental woes of littering among his high school cohorts.

"Playwriting rises above the rhetoric of what race is in our

country. It allows me to [climb] above the political correct analysis and create characters that show our lives naturally."

Since this Houston, Texas, defector has been living in New York City, two of his plays have been written and produced, "Descendants of Freedom" and "Super." In both of the productions, he explored the space between magical realism, homosexuality and the racial

Black *New Yorkers*

psyche of America.

Lancaster, who was a recipient of the Social Justice Fellowship from New York University Wagner and the Soros Foundation in 2006, created his own theater company, Freedom Train, from his prestigious endowment.

Freedom Train seeks to promote young, Black playwrights and provide a space where their works can be natured and developed. The theater compa-

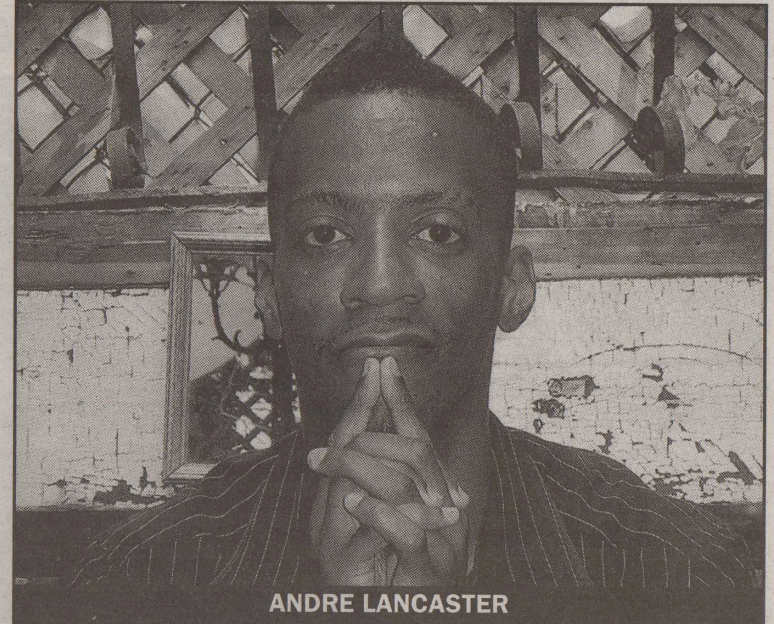
ny has five resident playwrights (including Lancaster) who meticulously workshop their plays as a collective and afterward present, "Fire" a month-long series of plays by each of the dramatists.

"We provide a platform for emerging Black theater artists to showcase their work to the theater industry so they can come and see exciting, new works by Black playwrights who have experiences in producing theater," said Lancaster gingerly.

Due to the overwhelming cost of producing a play, Freedom Train productions act like a magnet for professional directors and producers with the cash flow and extensive networks to view emerging works from Black playwrights and hopefully produce one of their plays.

Many of the pieces that are shown in "Fire" are works in progress and are edited snippets of the entire play.

"I am a really big believer in



ANDRE LANCASTER

development work," Lancaster said. He continued, "The most exciting part of the theater process for me is collaboration and to see how [a play can] change a person and to see how different people interrupt it."

Freedom Train productions has a little twist to its playwriting philosophy—each play by the resident playwright has to feature a Black LGBT protagonist.

"I feel like there are so many films that [portray] the stereotypical Black gay characters with homophobic undertones," and with implementing this dis-

claimer, Lancaster is hoping to shatter the skewed perceptions of the Black LGBT community and bring their stories to the center-stage.

According to Lancaster, the universal themes of all the plays in the "Fire" series are about "perseverance, love, religion, and fighting oppression, homophobia and racism."

The production of "Fire" will be running throughout the month of August at South Oxford Space in Brooklyn, and all of the plays are free and open to the public.

Spitzer signs bill aiding NYC public housing