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THE POWER OF BEING PRESENT

How an NC State LIVE residency
connects artists, students and audiences

BY KELLY McCALL BRANSON



T'S A SUNDAY AFTERNOON

in September, and 14 young women from NC State are gathered in the dance studio at Carmichael Gym, in their leggings and tank tops, shorts and socks, sliding across the worn floor to the sounds of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. With them are the award-winning Los Angeles-based choreographer/writer/director/filmmaker David Roussève and two of the dancers in his company, REALITY. They're finishing up a grueling two-day

workshop, and the students couldn't be happier about how they've just spent their entire weekend.

David Roussève was on campus as part of an artist residency with NC State LIVE. This one-of-a-kind opportunity for these students to interact with, learn from and be inspired by a celebrated professional is just one of the cross-disciplinary, campus-wide and greater-community outreach activities that this fall and spring residency will make possible.

The residency also gives Roussève and his company real performance space to polish their newest work, *Halfway to Dawn*, an evening-length piece layering dance, music, sound, video and text. Co-commissioned by NC State LIVE, *Halfway to Dawn* seeks to tell the story of a little-known jazz great, Billy Strayhorn. But with this work, Roussève hopes to transcend simple biography to explore the emotional core of a wildly talented and complicated man – what Roussève calls “a simmering pot of fact, conjecture and fantasy.”

And he sees the project, along with his time at NC State, as an opportunity to explore issues of fame and authenticity, race

and sexuality from Strayhorn’s historical perspective and as they are relevant today. With open rehearsals, workshops, master classes, artist talks and community outreach, Roussève has opened, and hopes to continue, a dialogue that transcends the art.

“Artist residencies are at the core of our mission to connect artists and audiences,” says Sharon Moore, director of NC State LIVE. “They provide multiple opportunities for our students and patrons to access the artists, and they build enthusiasm and anticipation for the performance.” Often more than a year in the planning, artist residencies offer students, artists and the greater community

unique possibilities for multi-layered intersection with art and craft, ideas and issues, differences and commonalities.

Purpose Driven

It’s been 20 years since Roussève’s last residency at NC State. The silver in his goatee is about the only evidence that this could be possible. His wiry dancer’s body and guileless enthusiasm for sharing his work belie the decades-long history of this much-awarded veteran. But his work exhibits a singular complexity and depth that only his particular, long experience, as a dancer, a choreographer, an African American child of inner-city Houston, and a gay man could bring.

Roussève grew up in Houston’s gritty Third Ward. His father was a New Orleans jazz musician, and Roussève’s lifelong passion for dance and theatre literally began on the streets of the Third Ward. “I started in the Alley Theatre,” he laughs, “which was a theatre in an alley.”

A child of the civil rights movement, Roussève was driven from an early age to connect his art with something larger, to create something of value for the greater community. “Theatre, for me, was a way to express ideas.”

He was accepted to Princeton and, knowing nothing at all about New Jersey, saw it was close to New York on the map and thought he’d go and become a Broadway hooper in his spare time. Yet he graduated magna cum laude and a Guggenheim Fellow.

Accepted to law school at both Columbia and NYU, Roussève, around the same time, discovered alternative dance and realized that this was the path that would



DAVID ROUSSÈVE WITH REALITY COMPANY MEMBERS LEANNE POIRIER AND KEVIN LE.

PHOTO BY ROBERT DAVEZAC

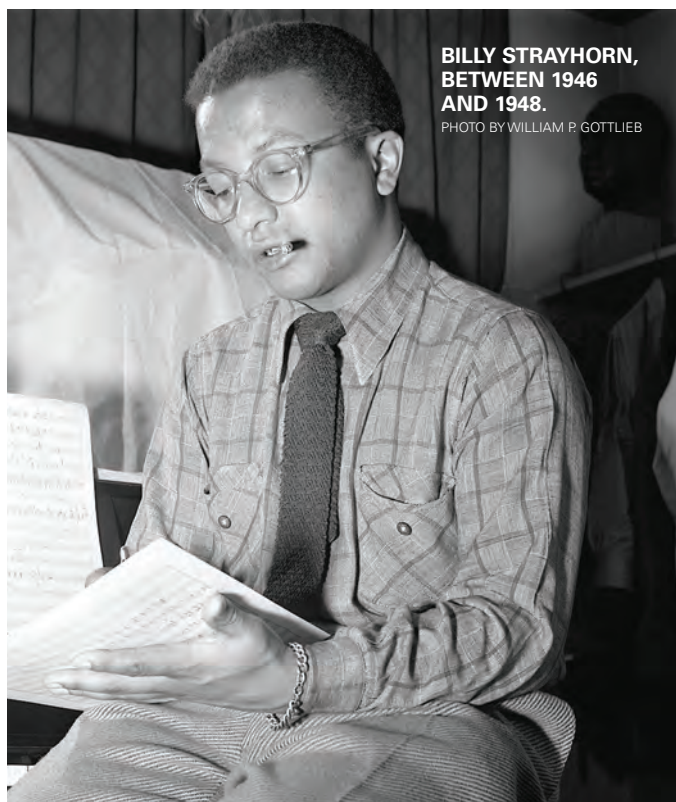
empower his passion for relevancy in a larger social context. “I saw this as a juncture where I realized what was missing,” he says, “and the ways that I could use a choreographic voice to meld together something highly interdisciplinary and socially grounded.”

Roussève spent the ‘80s living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, at the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic. “My own sense of activism was forever shaped by my association with ACT UP,” he says, “the idea of disruption, of art as activism.”

In 1988, he founded REALITY and set about crafting expressionistic avant-garde dance-theatre works exploring social and spiritual themes – from AIDS to racism to homophobia to poverty – interweaving movement, words, sound and visual imagery as a means of opening conversation and examination from the perspective of a common humanity.

In 1996, Roussève joined the faculty at UCLA’s School of the Arts and Architecture. He had never considered academia, but the dance department at UCLA struck him as a radical experiment; “I’m very interested in the ways that scholarship and practice inform and feed each other,” says Roussève. He has served as associate, acting and interim dean of the college and now teaches in the Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance.

Roussève first learned of the quiet man behind Duke Ellington more than two decades ago. Enamored of his music and fascinated by his story, Roussève knew it was one he wanted to interpret, but his Billy Strayhorn project was destined to percolate a few more years.



**BILLY STRAYHORN,
BETWEEN 1946
AND 1948.**

PHOTO BY WILLIAM P. GOTTLIEB

A Man in the Shadow

Billy Strayhorn is mostly known only to jazz aficionados, but this slight, unassuming, African American, gay man played a truly outsized role in the history of the greatest jazz band of its time and the arc of the music as we know it today. A pianist, songwriter, lyricist and arranger, Strayhorn authored and co-authored – sometimes without credit – many of Duke Ellington’s signature songs.

He was a staggering talent who spent nearly 30 years in the shadow of a larger-than-life celebrity. And despite conventional wisdom that he was content to remain out of the limelight, the melancholy subtext of his music, his physical and emotional struggles, and his untimely death beg the question: Was he?

Billy Strayhorn was born in 1915, the fourth of nine children, to a struggling family. He was so ill with rickets, he wasn’t expected to survive. He grew up in near-poverty in Pittsburgh, a bookish, gentle boy with an abusive alcoholic father.

But many summers of his formative years were spent in the refuge of his grandparents’ home on the banks of the Eno River, on Margaret Lane in Hillsborough, North Carolina. It was here that Strayhorn learned to play on his grandmother’s piano and here he perhaps learned early lessons about the juxtaposition of joy and pain that would inform his music and shape his life.

Back in Pittsburgh, Strayhorn worked two jobs to pay for a piano, sheet music and lessons – all before he was twelve. He wrote pop songs, played in a trio, and studied classical music. He created his



PHOTO BY ROBERT DAVEZAC

high school's graduation show, *Fantastic Rhythm*, a Cole Porter-style musical revue. He was nicknamed "Dictionary" for his ravenous intellectual curiosity. Strayhorn studied at the Pittsburgh Musical Institute and planned a career as a classical musician.

But during that period, he was also composing, arranging and performing jazz music. A brief backstage encounter with Duke Ellington in 1938, after a concert in Pittsburgh, was all it took for the famed musician to invite Strayhorn to visit him in New York.

Ellington jotted directions to his Harlem brownstone on a napkin: "Just take the A train" – the then-new subway service from Brooklyn into Harlem and northern Manhattan – and Strayhorn penned what would be Ellington's signature song on his way to New York. On that first visit, Ellington told Strayhorn, "You're with me," and took him into his home.

Strayhorn would spend more than a quarter-century collaborating with Ellington, writing or co-writing over 200 songs – nearly forty percent of the Ellington Orchestra's material. In addition to "Take the 'A' Train," he wrote such Ellington Orchestra classics as "Lush Life" (written when he was only 16 years old), "Chelsea Bridge," "Something to Live For" (purported to be Ella Fitzgerald's favorite song), the swingy "U.M.M.G." (Upper Manhattan Medical Group) and "Lotus Blossom."

His more sophisticated arrangements reanimated the mid-career Ellington and his orchestra. Strayhorn's complex compositions and classical components were pioneering in his day and took the Duke Ellington Orchestra to a level they surely would never have reached without him. His music continues to influence jazz musicians today.

And yet, few people have ever even heard of Billy Strayhorn. It was believed by many that the soft-spoken Strayhorn was content with staying in the background and letting Ellington take the limelight, but this may not have entirely been the case.

Strayhorn was a black man living an openly gay life in mid-century Harlem, a time when that was simply unheard of and potentially very dangerous. He never flaunted his homosexuality, but neither did Strayhorn make any attempt to deny it. It was his identity and he was fiercely independent and proud of who he was. So his willingness to remain in Ellington's shadow may well have represented an enormous sacrifice on Strayhorn's part, made for the sake of his integrity, but nevertheless, a heavy burden.

In a 1962 interview, Ellington and Strayhorn joked about collaborating and Strayhorn's

doing the lion's share of the writing. "Well, if it's a big success," said Ellington, "I have the tremendous responsibility of having to bow." Asked what he did while Ellington bowed, Strayhorn replied, "Yes, I'm the backstage clack. And he does bow magnificently." But then Strayhorn goes on to recall a concert in Europe where they played "Take the 'A' Train" and *Strayhorn* took the bow.

Roussève believes you can hear these conflicted emotional undercurrents playing out in Strayhorn's music, the lyrics, the notes, the phrasing, undertones of remorse and regret shading seemingly lighthearted ballads – all a kind of blueprint to his struggle between joy and pain and perhaps the necessity of one to experience the other. "His willingness to live his personal truth at all costs was what drew me to tell this story," says Roussève. "That bittersweet truth. Bittersweet is my middle name."

Though understated in his own self-promotion, Strayhorn was a fervent supporter of the civil rights movement. Unlike some superstars of color of the day, who believed the very existence of their stardom was a strike for social justice, Strayhorn worked openly for the cause alongside the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who became a close friend.

A lifetime of heavy drinking and smoking cut Strayhorn's short. He died in 1967, at the age of 51, of esophageal cancer. After his death, Ellington wrote: "Billy Strayhorn was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brain waves in his head, and his in mine." But these were never sentiments he made public during Strayhorn's lifetime.

“ His willingness to live his personal truth at all costs was what drew me to tell this story. That bittersweet truth. Bittersweet is my middle name.”

DAVID ROUSSÈVE

Halfway to Dawn

The wee hours of the morning were when Strayhorn's creativity bloomed. "I think everything should happen at halfway to dawn," he liked to say. "That's when heads of government should meet. I think everybody would fall in love." But surely, these are, as well, the hours of the dark night of the soul. Indeed, Roussève's title, *Halfway to Dawn*, evokes the same dichotomy he finds in Strayhorn's life and work.

Nine dancers move to period recordings of Strayhorn's music, while text and images are projected on a screen behind them, on light cubes onstage and even on each others' bodies. Sounds, evocative of the time and place, are interlaced with the music and dialogue among the dancers.

Roussève interweaves these elements to tell the story of Billy Strayhorn's life, but not just the facts, the external mileposts; "I wanted to excavate the deeper emotional truth buried in this music," he says, "to use the

vocabulary of dance to convey a sense of the integrity of his life, of not only his pathos, but also his adamant reclaiming of joy, dignity and humanity."

He enlisted long-time collaborator and former student Cari Ann Shim Sham to design the video components for the piece. Shim Sham, who describes herself as a "wild artist and prestidigitator," is a new media artist and filmmaker, and a pioneer in integrating visual imagery with dance and movement. She taught dance for camera for seven years at UCLA and is currently on the dance faculty at the NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

In order to convey a kind of raw emotional honesty, Shim Sham designed her own font and hand wrote all of the expository text that conveys the outline of Strayhorn's life and career. "I didn't want to work with sterile printed text," says Shim Sham, "so I hand wrote with Sharpie pens on sketch paper." She then photographed, inverted and color treated the words you see projected behind the dancers.

Throughout the piece, images are interspersed with the text on the large screen to evoke context of literal time and place, as well as metaphorical notions – scenes of 1940s Harlem life, champagne flutes toasting, a classic sad clown.

“David [Roussève] also let me go beyond the main screen,” says Shim Sham, “to develop multiple perspectives with smaller screens. Shim Sham designed two four-foot projection cubes on either side of the stage where images, like archival footage of civil rights protests and violence, are broadcast as a kind of subtext. Two tiny handheld projectors use the dancers’ bodies as screens offering another visual layer – a sort of interior subtext.

Halfway to Dawn is divided into two acts, the first a more literal interpretation of Strayhorn’s life, conjuring up a Harlem jazz club, with strutting, loose-limbed dance. The costumes loosely reference 1940s clothing and bar stools line the stage.

The second act diverges into more dreamlike territory, exploring the interior conflict of Billy Strayhorn and his ultimate unravelling. The dancers shed their street clothes for period-like white undergarments. Images of cigarettes burning down and whiskey splashing into a glass suggest despair.

“Billy Strayhorn’s life, his work, bring up such compelling issues around privacy and fame, authorship and authenticity,” says Roussève. “These are all so relevant today.” Strayhorn’s struggle to be heard and the price he paid, the tenuous balance he struck to keep hold of his true self, are universal themes that Roussève explores with his unique multi-dimensional dance-theatre.

“ Artist residencies are at the core of our mission to connect artists and audiences”

SHARON MOORE

Exploration, Collaboration, Inspiration

Roussève, the REALITY dancers, video artist Shim Sham and lighting designer Chris Kuhl spent a week at NC State this past fall, taking advantage of the Stewart Theatre space to put the finishing touches on *Halfway to Dawn*, ahead of its premier in October. And, in addition to setting the dance piece on the NC State Dance Company, they participated in a variety of events on campus, designed to engage in conversations beyond the art form itself, to explore the questions it raises. Roussève’s avant garde, socially conscious work is an ideal vehicle for this kind of larger dialogue.

Along with REALITY dancers Leanne Poirier and Kevin Le, Roussève hosted a “Meet & Move with the Artists” workshop. Open to all comers, folks of myriad ages gathered on a Tuesday evening at Stewart Theatre for an opportunity to experience the creative process alongside the artists. These non-dancers moved to the jazz music of Billy Strayhorn, and comments like, “I wanted to come and let my inner diva out,” and “I’ve been a beginning dancer for 40 years,” were overheard among the participants.

Roussève and Poirier met with representatives of the Arts Village,

University Scholars, the African American Cultural Center and other campus organizations to brainstorm ideas for cross-campus engagement with his work and the greater themes it explores in the spring when Roussève returns for the second phase of his artist residency.

As part of an effort at wider community outreach, Roussève also met with the LGBT Center of Raleigh to plan a discussion panel, in conjunction with the NC State GLBT Center, to examine gay rights issues in the historical context of Billy Strayhorn, his life and career, as they relate to today. Roussève is especially interested in probing the different generational perspectives. “Here is a gay man who lived openly with his partner in the 1940s,” he says. “My understanding of that is very different than the young dancers in my company. There really are three generations represented here – Strayhorn, myself and today’s kids – I’m really intrigued by the discussion that brings to the table.”

Roussève ventured further afield to Hillsborough, where Strayhorn spent such an important period of his life. He visited the spot on the Eno River where Strayhorn’s grandmother lived and met with community members there. The town has proclaimed February 26 as “Billy Strayhorn

Day," and plans are underway for educational events with Roussève and the dancers at Hillsborough middle and high schools, and an artist talk for the public. Visit go.ncsu.edu/HalfwayToDawn for a schedule of residency events.

Triangle puppeteer and frequent performer with Paperhand Puppet Intervention, Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins is creating a Billy Strayhorn puppet along with material exploring his life and his music.

Back on campus in the spring, Roussève will lead a presentation for a jazz history class. An intimate evening of dining and discussion with Roussève and his company is in the works, and he will participate in an artist Q&A at Talley Student Union, prior to the culmination of his artist residency – the performance of *Halfway to Dawn* at Stewart Theatre on March 2.

Back on that Sunday in September, as Roussève gathers the NC State dancers for final notes, these biochemistry and psychology and animal science majors talk about the little family they've formed in just these few days, the challenges of pushing themselves further than they thought they could go, and the inspiration of someone like Roussève. And instead of critiquing their technique, he reminds them that what they do when they dance, the way they give with their bodies from the depths of their hearts, is a life skill that will serve them in everything they do. ■

Kelly McCall Branson is a freelance writer who has written about the arts, dining, travel, sustainable living and home building for regional and local publications throughout the Southeast.

THINK AND DO THE EXTRAORDINARY:

ARTIST RESIDENCIES

NC State is midway through the Think and Do the Extraordinary Campaign, the most ambitious fundraising campaign in the university's history. As part of this \$1.6 billion effort, Arts NC State is raising millions to strengthen our programs and expand our outreach. Raising funds for artist residencies is one of our campaign priorities.

Artist residencies, such as David Roussève's, demonstrate how we think and do. We come together as a community of visual and performing arts programs and invite creators to make something new with us. And we share the experience. When the arts are for everyone, all can join in on the process.

David's residency has brought together NC State LIVE, the Dance Program, and the Department of Music to teach our community about the life of a bold, innovative thinker and artist with North Carolina roots: Billy Strayhorn. Artist residences are immersive and require enormous commitments of time, resources and energy. Without the support of private individuals and institutions, we could not have hosted David and his collaborators. Artist residencies are not completely supported by university funds. We rely almost entirely upon the generosity of donors to make these unforgettable experiences possible.

You can help make artist residencies possible at Arts NC State.

Supporters can create an artist residency endowment and ensure that Arts NC State will be able to host artist residencies in perpetuity. Donors may also make a one-time gift to sponsor one or more artist residency programs. Various options exist to make giving more accessible, such as paying commitments over a period of years or making a planned gift. To learn more, contact Jill Orr, director of arts development, at 919.513.4101 or jhorr2@ncsu.edu.