

'Calming the Man' comes to life again at FAMU

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Playwright Anthony L. White — who goes by his penname Anthony Lamarr — grew up in Perry, Florida, near the railroad tracks.

Lamarr noticed how many small, southern towns had a similar railroad track running through it, often feeling as looming and impenetrable as a wall. Growing up on one side of the tracks versus the other sometimes meant that life looked incredibly different given varying socioeconomic realities and segregation between races.

"I wanted to write a story about that," says Lamarr, who began writing "Calm-



Ashley Williams, Tevin Ellis, Hassan Ashi Jr., Anthony, Lance Reddick, Kevin Bronson, and Keith Franklin - the cast and crew of "Calming the Man" at the 4th Annual Leimert Park / Vision Theatre Reading Festival in Los Angeles in September 2017. ANTHONY LAMARR

ing the Man." "I wanted to do a play that was set in the 1970s after segregation and integration. African Americans felt

they were going to finally be seen as equal, but it didn't turn out that way. I think in that is the root of the angry

If you go

What: Writing for Life Play Reading Series presents Calming the Man

When: Feb. 26-27

Where: Online

Contact: For more information, visit famuessentialtheatre.com/project/calming-the-man

black man myth. Black people became angrier because even though they weren't segregated, there was still inequality."

"Calming the Man" is being showcased this month as part of FAMU Essential Theatre's Writing for Life Play Reading Series. Directed by Luther D.

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Wells, the play will be livestreamed on Feb. 26 and 27. Lamarr is ready to see this play come to life once again, as it's been a project nearly 30 years in the making.

He began his first draft of the work as a journalism student at the University of Florida in 2001. Until that point, he had only written one-act plays. Lamarr had picked up a copy of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" and "Fences" and was inspired to begin writing in his own style. The play follows a father, his two sons and his best friend as the undercurrents of their relationships are explored and deepened.

"I get a lot of inspiration from my own life or things I've heard or seen, or stories people have passed down," says Lamarr. "I had a friend I grew up with, and he and his dad had a crazy kind of dynamic. I wanted to explore this father-son dynamic and decided to set it in the '70s because the issues I perceived his father having were all related to what happened to him in his life after segregation."

Lamarr shelved "Calming the Man" temporarily after it was selected and shown at the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He returned to the play in 2012. In the time between first penning the play and returning to it for a second draft, Lamarr self-published two novels, "The Pages We Forget" and "Our First Love" which were both re-distributed by Simon & Schuster.

"Calming the Man" was presented by the New African Grove Theatre Company in Atlanta, which motivated Lamarr to continue editing the story. It was accepted into the Kennedy Center Playwriting Festival in Washington, D.C., that same year. Lamarr was offered a playwriting fellowship through Atlanta's Alliance Theatre where he continued to work on the play, as well as write a new work, "The Long Goodbye."

"One of the most rewarding moments for me as a playwright was having the opportunity to premiere 'The Long Goodbye' at the Monticello Opera House, which is where the story takes place," remarks Lamarr.

North Florida is embedded within his stories. Lamarr writes from personal ex-

periences, and often in the creative process is faced with choosing which medium best fits his ideas. As a novelist, screenwriter and playwright, he decides where the story gets told after evaluating its key components. Lamarr recalls the words of his feature writing professor, who advised him to "write to be read."

"You're writing a novel for the reader, not for the press," says Lamarr. "If you're going to write a stage play, write it for the audience, not for the playwright."

Even though he began as a screenwriter, Lamarr found the mechanics of getting a story onto a film or television screen lengthy and often fruitless.

He wanted his stories to have a life beyond his own imagination and reach audiences where they could find their emotional footing. Lamarr's career as a feature writer has taken his stories to the Marietta Daily Journal and the Gainesville Sun, and currently in his column "Remember When" for the Perry News Herald. Though, he turns to playwriting to bring more personal stories onstage.

"The more intimate the story, the more I gravitate towards being a playwright because it allows for that kind of intimacy and character depth," says Lamarr. "Playwriting doesn't allow for anything else to distract you. There's not a whole world you build around it. You're just face to face with the character."

As Lamarr reflects back on 2020, he feels the time is right for "Calming the Man" to resurface once more. Over the years, he has worried about how people receive the work given the seen and unseen violence that hovers over the characters and their actions. In spite of this apprehension, he enjoys watching people watch the play as they navigate the racial tensions of Black life in the early 1970s.

"In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and all that has transpired in 2020, this play speaks volumes to why this is still happening," says Lamarr. "I hope the audience will walk away with an empathy for how others feel. An empathy for people who feel like they still haven't gotten to live the American dream."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).