

Experience L.A. **LACKAWANNA BLUES**

Wednesday, April 17, 2019
Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- ◉ *Lackawanna Blues* is a 2001 play by Ruben Santiago-Hudson.
- ◉ Ruben Santiago-Hudson is an actor, writer, and director who has won major national awards for his work in all three categories.

LACKAWANNA BLUES

Lackawanna Blues is a montage of memories and stories inspired by the life of Ruben Santiago-Hudson's primary caregiver when he was a child growing up in a boarding house in Lackawanna, New York, in the 1950s and '60s. It is essentially a one-man show, with Santiago-Hudson playing all of the characters. He is accompanied by GRAMMY-winning musician and actor Chris Thomas King, who plays blues music composed by Bill Sims Jr. *Lackawanna Blues* premiered off-Broadway in 2001 and was adapted into an HBO movie in 2005.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

Ruben Santiago-Hudson (b. 1956) is an actor, playwright, and director. He won a Tony in 1996 for his performance in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, was a star of the TV series *Castle* (2009–11), and won an Obie Award in 2013 for directing the off-Broadway production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. He won the Humanitas Prize in writing for the HBO adaptation of *Lackawanna Blues* and has been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the NAACP.

LACKAWANNA, NEW YORK

Lackawanna is a small city (pop. approximately 18,000) along Lake Erie, just outside Buffalo. Named after the Lackawanna Steel Company, it was a prosperous mill town when Ruben Santiago-Hudson was growing up there and for much of the twentieth century. The steel plant closed in 1983, after mass layoffs. What is now known as Lackawanna was the land of the Seneca Indians until 1842 and was part of the Buffalo Creek Reservation until the 1850s.

THE BLUES

Blues music is a form of African American folk music that originated in the American South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, influenced by African American



field songs, spirituals, and white American folk music. By the 1960s, it was one of the most important influences in American popular music.

The blues are characterized by expressive vocals, microtonal pitches (or “blue notes”), and a 12-bar form. African musical traditions inform the tonality, the vocal style, the call-and-response pattern of repeated refrains, and the ways instruments—especially the guitar and harmonica—imitate the human voice.

The first blues recordings were made in the 1920s by black women such as Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. As African Americans moved out of the South during the Great Migration of the twentieth century, blues music spread throughout the United States and was shaped by new and different influences. The blues became “the foundation of virtually every major American music form born in the twentieth century, including jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop” (PBS).

CENTER THEATRE GROUP

The nonprofit Center Theatre Group is one of the largest theatre companies in the United States, offering year-round programming at the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson Theatre, and the Kirk Douglas Theatre. The company has been producing theatre for more than 50 years, and regularly programs award-winning revivals as well as world premieres.

MARK TAPER FORUM

The Mark Taper Forum is known for presenting new and innovative plays in an atmosphere more intimate than that of its Music Center neighbors, the Ahmanson Theatre and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The Music Center was designed in the late 1960s by Los Angeles architect Welton Becket, whose firm created many iconic L.A. buildings, including the Capitol Records Building, the Beverly Hilton Hotel, and the Carousel of Progress at Disneyland, which looks a bit like the Mark Taper Forum. The Taper, which is named for real-estate developer Mark Taper, underwent a major renovation in 2007, which retained its signature circular shape but significantly updated the interior. The 739-seat theatre features a thrust stage, which extends into the audience on three sides.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Why do you think Santiago-Hudson chose to place the musician on stage with him? How did this affect your experience of the play?
- Is there someone in your life that you could imagine creating a work of art about? What about them would you want to communicate to others?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Other plays at the Mark Taper Forum
www.centertheatregroup.org/tickets
- Some of L.A.’s other theatrical venues
www.thelatc.org
www.geffenplayhouse.org
thebroadstage.org
- The Blues*
www.pbs.org/theblues



Photo: Craig Schwartz

Ruben Santiago-Hudson



Photo: Craig Schwartz

L-R: Chris Thomas King (background) and Ruben Santiago-Hudson in the Center Theatre Group production of *Lackawanna Blues*.



Mark Taper Forum

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

BRYN ZIEGLER of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about tonight's performance. Those with a call number (e.g. books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g. e-books, journal articles, and databases) are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

BOOKS & DISSERTATIONS

- Adelt, Ulrich. *Black, White and Blue: Racial Politics of Blues Music in the 1960s*. PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2007.
- McClelland, Ted. *Nothin' but Blue Skies: The Heyday, Hard Times, and Hopes of America's Industrial Heartland*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: HC107.A14 M37 2013
- Terry, Jill and Neil A. Wynn. *Transatlantic Roots Music: Folk, Blues, and National Identities*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
MUSIC LIBRARY: ML3545.T73 2012
- Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007.
LEAVEY LIBRARY: PS3573.I45677 P56 2007

DATABASES

- American Song
- Proquest Performing Arts Periodicals Database
- Music Index Online

ARTICLES

- Eagle, Bob. "Directory of African-Appalachian Musicians." *Black Music Research Journal* 24, no. 1 (2004): 7-71.
- Horwitz, Simi. "Paying Tribute in *Lackawanna Blues*." *Back Stage* 42, no. 20 (2001): 7.
- Stephens, Vincent. "What Child Is This?: Closely Reading Collectivity and Queer Childrearing in *Lackawanna Blues* and *Noah's Arc*." *African American Review* 44, no. 1 (2011): 235-253.

VIDEO

- Lackawanna Blues*, DVD. 2005 (95 min.).
CINEMATIC ARTS LIBRARY: VIDEOS TV DVD 424

