

'Revival: The Resurrection of Son House' at Geva a world premiere about a legend



Cleavant Derricks is Son House in Geva's world premiere production. (Photo: Goat Factory Media Entertainment)

The story of Son House, a legendary and pioneering Delta blues artist who ended up living in Rochester, at long last has taken stage. Geva Theatre Center's production of *Revival: The Resurrection of Son House*, on stage through June 2, has all the ingredients to be a crowd-pleaser.

On paper it has everything: an important story, amazing music, and a talented-yet-troubled main character. Despite this embarrassment of riches, Keith Glover, the show's writer and director, expects that in the end, audiences will be talking about Cleavant Derricks. He plays Son House and seems to have been born to play Son House.

"The thing that really made this special was (Derricks)," Glover says. "To be able to begin it with him — to know that I'm starting at the top."

For emphasis, Glover puts a number to it: If a group of producers were at a table listing the ideal actors for this role, he says, "Cleavant is going to be one of three names."

"You want to make sure you really get out of his way," he adds.

Derricks is a veteran Broadway actor and singer who, as Derricks himself says, "came up through the trenches" in New York, where he studied in small theater companies — the kind where you hoped the show would go on, and you hoped (but weren't sure) you'd get paid.

Later, he broke through with a Tony Award-winning portrayal of James "Thunder" Early in the 1981 hit staging of *Dreamgirls*. He followed that in 1986 with another Tony nomination as the lead in *Big Deal*, a Bob Fosse musical.

Beyond his resumé and talent, Derricks identifies with Son House, whose religious father

“I know who he is because I grew up a lot like him,” Derricks said. “I grew up in the church. My dad was a pastor and always wanted me to be a pastor and was grooming me to be a pastor.”

In the end, Son House chose the blues. Derricks, with his father’s support, chose the stage.

“That pain and that cry and that thing in his voice...when I heard him I said, ‘That’s a church boy,’” Derricks says. “He grew up in church. Because none of the other blues out of the Delta, none of them sounded like him. They had their own flavor but this man — I knew he was out of the church. And that’s why I gravitated to him.”

Eddie “Son” House Jr.’s life was a dramatic one and — from a musicology perspective — an important one. Even if you’ve never heard a Son House recording, you’ve heard his style.

Born in Mississippi, Son House was an influence and mentor to Robert Johnson and later Muddy Waters, two blues greats who influenced, well, everybody. The Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, and The White Stripes are easy-to-spot descendants of Son House, but the real trick would be finding someone in the blues and rock universe who *hasn’t* been — knowingly or unknowingly — influenced by Son House.

The word “legend” is thrown around a lot in the music industry. If it ever makes sense, it makes sense here. But America misplaced its legend. Son House left music and entered obscurity in the 1940s only to be rediscovered living in Rochester in the 1960s. Along the way, he served time for murder, married five times and wrestled with his spirituality — and no doubt, a whole lot more.

“Son didn’t ever do anything less than 100%,” Glover says. “If he was with the devil, it was 100%. If he was with God, it was 100%. If he was at the bar, he was going to be there 100%. And that kinda guy... he’s not easy.”

Good art rarely is. And we know the road to this world premiere hasn’t been easy. Glover calls the development “expensive work” and he’s not talking about production costs, but “what it takes out of you.”

And there’s a lot of pressure to get it right — to live up to a legend.

“You have to really be in line with Son, or you know you’ll be throwing it out in the morning,” Glover says. “So you really have to have that kind of focus ... It does exhaust you when you’re going from draft to draft.”

The Pulitzer-nominated playwright isn’t complaining, though; the exhausting work he says is the work you want to be doing.

The show, commissioned by Geva, goes back at least four years and includes a 2015 public reading of a version of the script, which Glover now describes as “very much in utero.”

“When we did this reading four years ago, I felt it,” Derricks says. “This show has something. I said I want you to keep me in mind.”

Glover says the script, based on the biography by Daniel Beaumont (another Rochester local), is quite different from his 2015 draft, which ran more than three hours. It now clocks in at about two.

Although he has written musicals in the past, and music is obviously a huge component in *Revival*, Glover isn't calling it a musical. For one thing, don't expect a song every two pages.

"It's a passion play — that is what it is," he says, as if he has just decided what to label it. "It's a passion play. And passion plays have music, but that music usually expressed an emotional color of where the characters were. Is it an American musical? No, it's a passion play, which covers me in terms of why are they singing."

Of course, Son House will be providing a lot of the music. So will the show's music director Billy Thompson, a world-class blues player in his own right, who has performed with Albert King, Earl King and Art Neville.

Thompson, who has worked with Glover before, is another example of that embarrassment of riches in a show that seems to have everything.