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Writing to Make a Difference

Local playwright debuts new work after injury

BY DANNY PETERSON,
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

After an injury and five year hiatus to focus on family and work, African-American Portland playwright Kwik Jones is set to premiere his new play, "Jupiter is Stormy" for a free one-day-only showing during the upcoming Memorial Day weekend.

Jones arranged the first rehearsal of the production just last week, which is set to premiere at 3 p.m. on Saturday, May 26 at Kelly's Olympian in downtown Portland.

The play was originally set to debut late last month, but complications from a spinal cord injury Jones suffered made putting the production together unmanageable, so he canceled that showing. He's since been put on a new nerve medication that has enabled him to continue working on the play, although he had to recast it, Jones told the Portland Observer.

Jones grew up in northeast Portland and has been writing issue-minded plays locally, including "Voices," and "Spotlight," for over 20 years. A Jefferson High School alum, he has been known to use surplus earnings from his productions to feed the homeless with his family around the holidays. This time, he's funneling his generosity to the audience by premiering the play at no cost.

"Jupiter is Stormy" centers on African American teens, Blaze, played by Ariès Annitya, and Stormy, played by Netty McKenzie, who are long-lost loves that both enjoy alternative subcultures—Blaze listens to metal and Stormy is a goth girl. But Blaze has been masquerading as a hip-hop head to avoid ridicule from his classmates. When they're reunited, Stormy encourages him to just be himself.

"It asks the question 'what's black?' Because I'm black I can't listen to metal? Because I'm black I can't play hockey? Because I'm black I can't skydive? Because you're white you're not supposed to do hip-hop? How come I can't be who I want to be and still be accepted by my people?" Jones said.

The unusual premise was originally meant to be about teens in rival gangs who fall in love. But when Jones asked his teenage daughter if there were gangs at her school, she said there weren't very many. Largely, she said, there were the "cool

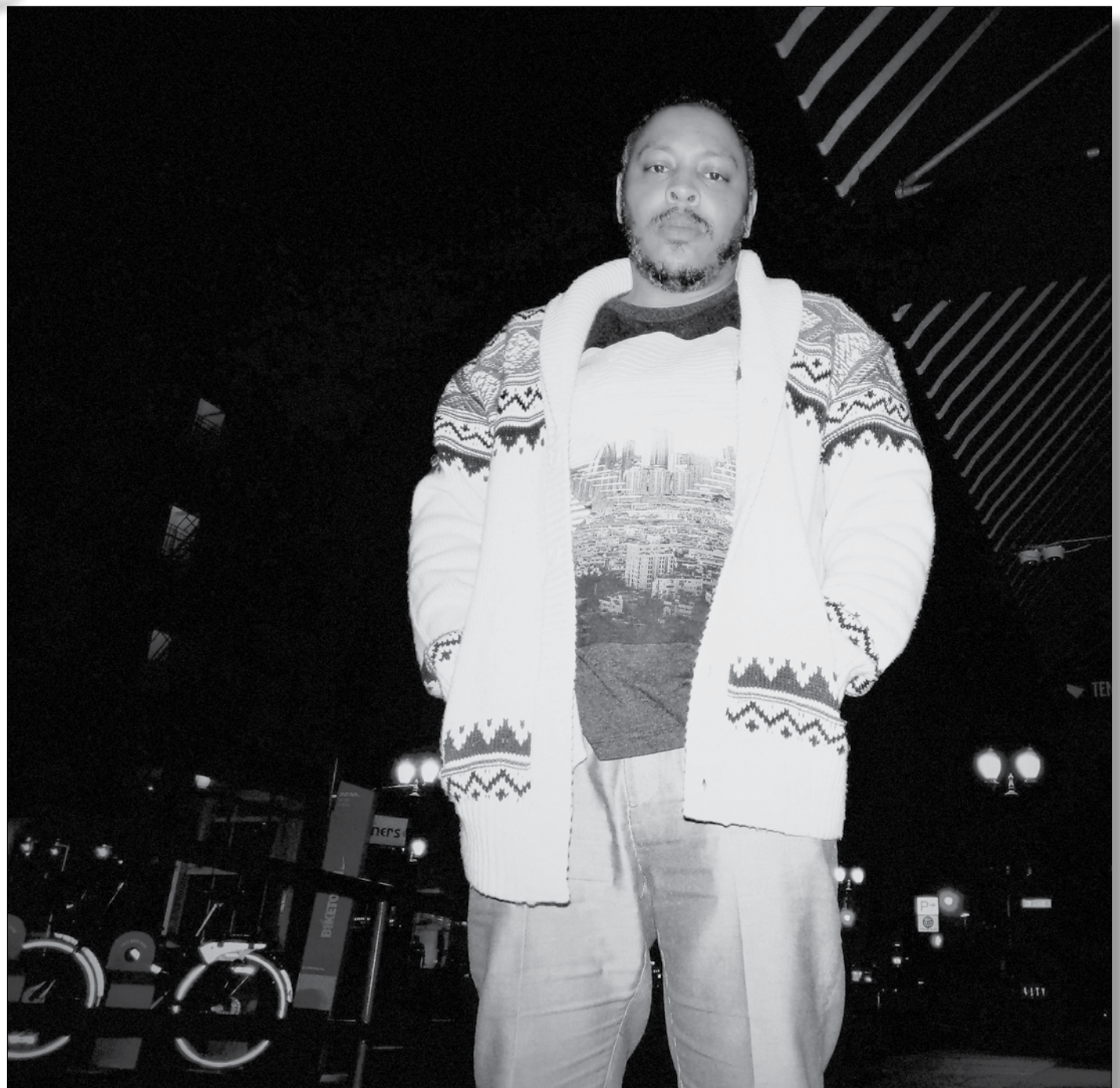


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Actor and playwright Kwik Jones has been a writing issue-minded plays in Portland for over 20 years. His new play, "Jupiter is Stormy," follows his return to writing after a spinal cord injury rendered him unable to work.

kids," the "sports kids," and then the "goth/emo" kids.

"So that's where the story came from. And when I was doing my research I found out that there are people...alternative lifestyles is what they call them...they love metal, rock, punk...there's a number of African Americans, black people, that's into that. And I was like 'wow.' I didn't have any idea that the subculture of goth was big for a lot of African Americans," Jones said.

Jones used YouTube vlogs of goth teens as research then used his own imagination to tie in the story to themes such as civil

rights and gay and lesbian issues. It takes place in one room, a program to catch up on academic credits for high school students struggling to graduate on time. The play also took some inspiration from John Hughes' film "The Breakfast Club," a 1985 coming of age drama about teens from wildly different high school social groups in detention together.

"I think the theme of the play is really the imprisonment of people. Here are these kids that are in a last chance program, they're in a credit recovery. They stay in one room all day, every day. How do they break from that? How do they break from

what they're in? Do they want to break from what they're in?" Jones said.

The 44 year old playwright said he'd dabbled in sketches and monologues in grade school, but phased that out when he became interested in sports. When he sustained a chipped bone in his ankle during his college years of playing football at Eastern Oregon State University in La Grande, he decided to get into writing plays. His football coach laughed dismissively at the switch, but Jones wrote his first play that very night—"Both Sides of

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