

'I want a challenge,' Says Forest Whitaker on Broadway Debut

Whitaker this month stars in a Broadway revival of Eugene O'Neill's 'Hughie'

By **Mark Kennedy**
AP Drama Writer

NEW YORK — Forest Whitaker has not one or two copies of the script he's memorized for his Broadway debut. Not three or four copies, either. Try five.

The actor, director and producer pulled them out of his backpack recently and all of them were battered, underlined and soaked in highlighter. One was studded with little photographs he added to evoke feelings.

Whitaker these days is like a graduate student during finals. Every word seems to have been interrogated, researched and then put back, gingerly. This is what he needs to do.

"You've got to. Well, I mean, I don't know if you've got to. I

a Broadway revival of Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie," a short play about human connection that requires the actor to speak for an hour virtually nonstop.

"It's really going to force me to grow," he said. "It's very challenging for me in so many ways. I guess I didn't even realize how challenging until I actually took it on."

Like O'Neill's more famous works such as "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh," "Hughie" deals with the pathetic illusions men create for themselves to fill their sad lives.

Tony Award-winning producer Darren Bagert, who helped lead the last Broadway revival of "Long Day's Journey Into Night," sent the script for "Hughie" to Whitaker in the hope of finally luring him on-



This image released by Polk & Co. shows Forest Whitaker, right, making his Broadway debut in a scene from "Hughie."

was likely to decline. But something about "Hughie" — with Michael Grandage directing — grabbed him.

ceptions around it and yet it's written by this amazing playwright."

"Hughie" is a two-character play set in a rundown New York hotel in 1928. Whitaker plays Erie, a low-level gambler and spinner of tall tales about himself. The only other role is a bored night clerk, who has taken over from the recently deceased Hughie.

Erie is mourning the loss of the only person who believed in him. "He's a guy who likes to tell stories and likes to hear himself talk," Whitaker said.

"There are guys like that. I had a friend who, even if you left the phone for 30 minutes and made a sandwich and came back, he'd still be talking."

The play marks Whitaker's return to the stage after 30 years. After graduating from the University of Southern California, he was in an improv show at the Mark Taper Forum and a musical at the Inner City Cultural Center, but then movies came calling, starting with "Fast Times at Ridgemont High."

Since then, Whitaker's credits include Oliver Stone's "Platoon," Lee Daniels' "The Butler," Neil Jordan's "The Crying Game" and his Oscar-winning turn as Idi Amin in 2006's "The Last King of Scotland." He said he needed to grow before returning to theater.

"He easily could have done a multitude of other ensemble plays, which he would have easily gotten amazing acknowledgment as the featured actor," said Bagert. "But Forest said to me, 'I want a challenge. I want something that's going to challenge me as an actor and a person.'"

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“Color can't be wiped out — it's there, I'm a Black actor — but you move past that into the minutia of the story itself and the spirits or souls of these particular people,” he said

have to,” he said during a visit to his modest dressing room at the Booth Theatre. “There are so many things for me to learn.”

stage.

Whitaker over the years had been offered plenty of roles in plays or revivals, but always refused. Even his agent warned Bagert that the actor

“I had never heard of it. I had never seen it. I actually couldn't locate someone who had,” Whitaker said. “It's almost like doing an original play because it has no precon-



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