

# The Tale He Had To Tell

*Ruben Santiago-Hudson '78 mines story-telling gold  
from his boarding-house upbringing.*

**B**ecause of a love poem, Ruben Santiago-Hudson '78 found himself back in upstate New York on a sunlit Saturday this July.

The poem in question isn't an amorous sonnet. Rather, it's Santiago-Hudson's ode to the time, place and people that nurtured and inspired him — and in particular to his foster mother, Rachel "Nanny" Crosby.

"I wrote a tribute, a love poem to someone I loved," the Tony and Obie award-winning actor told an audience that had gathered to hear him at the Buffalo and Erie County Central Library. "That's all I did. I opened it in a 140-seat theater in Manhattan for a three-week run. But something funny happened. All of a sudden, there weren't any seats available."

When it opened in 2001, Santiago-Hudson's autobiographical, one-man play, "Lackawanna Blues," told a story that enthralled New Yorkers. "It was like a Yankees game," he recalls. "People were standing outside with this poster saying, 'Need tickets to 'Lackawanna Blues.'" The play remained on stage a full 10 weeks.

The heart of "Lackawanna Blues" is Crosby. But the play also introduces audiences to the boarders who lived in the two rooming houses Crosby owned in Lackawanna, N.Y., for several decades after World War II. These lodgers were a mélange of drifters, addicts, prostitutes, thieves and other lost souls who found a roof, a warm meal and hefty doses of love and kindness from Crosby. Among them were a pretty young woman from Pennsylvania — Santiago-Hudson's mother, Alean Hudson — and

*BY GARY E. FRANK ~ PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY APPOIAN*



the baby Alean had conceived with Ruben Santiago Sr., a Puerto Rican railroad worker.

"Nanny took in whoever came to her door," Santiago-Hudson says. "White, black, Puerto Rican, Arab . . . anyone who knocked on her door, she helped."

Hudson was only 20 when she gave birth to her son. When the pressures of mixing motherhood with youthful distractions and indulgences proved too much to handle, she left her 1-year-old son Ruben in Crosby's care (though until his death, Ruben Santiago Sr. remained a strong presence in his son's life). In "Lackawanna Blues," Santiago-Hudson recreates the experience of growing up among characters like Sweet Tooth Sam, Shakey Winfield, Numb Finger Pete and Ol' Po' Carl, who is convinced he'll die from "the roaches of the liver."

"They were my first audience and my first subjects," Santiago-Hudson says. "They were the people from whom I borrowed and stole rhythms, style, integrity, dignity, pride and even a sense of intellect — because although they lacked formal schooling, they had 'mother wit,' or tremendous common sense. And if they didn't, Nanny would be the barometer of their common sense, saying, 'Have you lost your whole mind?'"

The authenticity at the core of "Lackawanna Blues" touches virtually every audience. This summer, Santiago-Hudson's screenplay of the HBO Films' production of it received a Humanitas Award. The film also was nominated for seven Emmy Awards, including Best Made-for-Television Movie; S. Epatha Merkerson won Lead Actress in a Miniseries or Movie for her role as Nanny.

Don Boros, an associate professor of theatre at Binghamton University, believes that "Lackawanna Blues" is the story that compelled Santiago-Hudson to seek expression. "What he was doing needed to be personal in a way that it wasn't for the other [students]," Boros says.

In one of the first classes the actor took with Boros, each student was assigned a monologue to deliver in class. Santiago-Hudson decided to recite something else.

Boros recalls, "My first reaction was, 'Hey, I've got to kick this guy in the butt. He's not doing what he was supposed to be doing.' Then I kept watching." Santiago-Hudson's recitation was "something that he had [such] a connection to. He actually became riveting. I became aware then that he had a fire in his belly."

Afterward, Boros sat down to chat with Santiago-Hudson. It became the first of many discussions. "I began to realize that this guy came from a complicated background, and he was living a particularly complicated life at that time," Boros says.

By the time he entered Binghamton as a first-year student, Santiago-Hudson had fathered two sons with different women. He threw himself into the social whirl of college life, joined

the campus radio station and dated — a lot. When his grades suffered, he was asked to leave. But by that time, he'd caught the eye of people who were determined to help him get on the right path. One was the late Lofton Mitchell, a playwright-historian who taught in the Theatre Department for 15 years. Other mentors were the late dancer-choreographer Percival Bordé, who taught in the dance program, and John Yeldell, an administrator in the Educational Opportunity Program.

"These are people who believed in me," Santiago-Hudson says. "When I was kicked out of school, Yeldell helped me get into Buffalo State." After a year at Buffalo State College, Santiago-Hudson re-entered Binghamton University. "I came back dead serious then," he says. "I started auditioning. I dropped all my girlfriends [and] the radio station. . . . I concentrated on the theatre."

Even so, life at Binghamton was frustrating enough that he considered transferring to Howard University (a historically black, private university in Washington, D.C.). Mitchell, whose many achievements included co-writing the Tony-award-winning musical "Bubbling Brown Sugar," talked him out of it. "I told Lofton that I was tired of trying to fit in here," Santiago-Hudson recalls. "He sat me down and said, 'Will you have a Lofton Mitchell at Howard, someone who will sit with you like this and mentor you?'" Ultimately, Santiago-Hudson didn't leave because, as he says, "All along the way, someone [at Binghamton] was there to push me."

People like Boros helped him take important steps, including auditioning for professional roles at the local Cider Mill Playhouse. "As he continued working here, you could see that Ruben began to become more mature, more thoughtful, less emotional and less visceral," Boros says. "I realized that the logical thing for Ruben to do was to go to a place where he could concentrate solely on acting." So Boros encouraged Santiago-Hudson to attend the University Resident Theatre Association auditions, where he was offered 13 scholarships to study theater in graduate school, and urged Santiago-Hudson to pursue an MFA at Wayne State University.

### *Walking in another's shoes*

After completing his MFA, Santiago-Hudson moved to New York City and eventually won a role in the Negro Ensemble Company's production of "A Soldier's Play." He also began to secure work in television and films, most notably a three-year stint as Captain Billy Cooper, a police officer on the soap opera "Another World." His breakthrough role was as the cornet player Buddy Bolden in the 1993 Broadway production "Jelly's Last Jam," opposite the late Gregory Hines.

Three years later came the role that won him a Tony Award for Best Featured Performer in "Seven Guitars." The drama





Ruben Santiago-Hudson '78 played Freddie Cobbs, one of the residents of Rachel "Nanny" Crosby's boarding house, in the HBO Films version of his one-man autobiographical play, "Lackawanna Blues." He is shown here with actor Marcus Carl Franklin, who played Ruben Santiago Jr. (Santiago-Hudson's given name) in the film.

is the sixth piece in the late August Wilson's 10-play cycle about African American life during the 20th century. Santiago-Hudson's portrayal of Canewell moved one *New York Times* critic to declare that his lines were delivered with "a gravity that reveals their poetry."

"Seven Guitars" also was the first time Boros had seen his former pupil on stage in several years. "Ruben was connecting with this [character] in such a way that he was just crackling up there," Boros recalls. "Even when he was quiet or jocular, he had something going on behind those eyes that no one else on the stage did."

That "something" is Santiago-Hudson's ability to "easily walk a mile in another man's shoes," says actor Stephen Henderson, an associate professor of acting at the University of Buffalo.

"Acting isn't a matter of deceiving the audience to him," Henderson says. "It's a matter of telling the [human] truth that the writer is trying to reach," no matter how unsympathetic a character may be. Henderson believes this quality has roots in Nanny Crosby's compassion. "That woman clearly was the last resort for a lot of people," he says. "Some of Ruben's empathy has to come from her spirit."

Mara Isaacs, the producing director of the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, N.J., witnessed that effect firsthand. In the days immediately following 9/11, managers at the McCarter faced a dilemma. Their original schedule called for

them to run Richard Nelson's "Vienna Notes," which focused on the subject of terrorism — a poor choice for traumatized audiences. Isaacs was familiar with Santiago-Hudson's work, so she asked if he could perform "Lackawanna Blues." "He dropped everything and came down," she says.

"It was a tour-de-force performance," Isaacs recalls. "Ruben's presence on that stage, telling the stories about Nanny, was about a specific place and a specific time. But the stories reminded everyone in the audience of a side of humanity that people desperately needed to be touched with at that particular moment. The play had extraordinary healing power."

### *Gaining wisdom*

**I**n more than a quarter-century of acting, Santiago-Hudson's stage work has won accolades from coast to coast. He has performed Shakespeare in Central Park, appeared on television with the likes of Halle Berry, David Caruso and Louis Gossett Jr., and performed in films with John Travolta, Al Pacino, Jeff Bridges and Samuel L. Jackson.

Why isn't he a household name? "I don't like playing the game," he says. "I may play a few innings, but I won't play the game."

For Santiago-Hudson, the "game" is being offered acting roles that he believes present negative stereotypes. It's seeing the final curtain come down prematurely on the Broadway stage production of August Wilson's latest play, "Gem of the Ocean," whose cast included Santiago-Hudson, Lisa Gay Hamilton and Phylicia Rashad. "Gem" drew crowds and rave reviews but didn't get the kind of *New York Times* attention the producers wanted.

Santiago-Hudson isn't letting stymied opportunities hold him back, though. After all, he has a family and a career to tend. He has been married to his wife, Jeannie, for 15 years. The couple has two children, 9-year-old fraternal twins Lily and Trey, and Santiago-Hudson maintains good relations with his two grown sons.

This fall, he's directing "Gem" at the McCarter and will do so later at the American Conservatory Theater. He hopes to perform "Lackawanna Blues" for the first time in Buffalo in 2006. He's also looking forward to doing more writing and directing in the coming years.

"You can rest assured, whatever I do, small or large, there's going to be some history to it, some integrity in that role, whether I'm a cop, the guy running down the street with a television, or a teacher in a school," Santiago-Hudson says. "I'm going to find the dignity in that person."

Peering through the lens of long experience, his mentor Boros frames Santiago-Hudson's prospects this way: "I think the frustrated young man I once knew has gained wisdom." **B**