

## INSIDE NEW YORK

**'Best Picks'** By JOAN H. ALLEN, Editor**'IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME'**

*A Conversation With Charles Weldon,  
Artistic Director of the NEC*

Samuel Jackson flew in from Los Angeles, California to see the Negro Ensemble Company's (NEC) latest hit play, "The Waiting Room" by NEC alumnus Samm-Art Williams and directed by NEC's Artistic Director, Charles Weldon. "If they build it they will come," states Mr. Weldon who has worked steadfast to revive the legendary NEC.

The return of Mr. Williams to the NEC for his latest play is the first play at the NEC since it produced his hit play, "Home," in 1979. "Home" moved to Broadway where it received a Tony nomination. So, everyone's eager to see what hap-

pens with this play. Lately it has been playing to sold out audiences at the 45th Street Theatre.

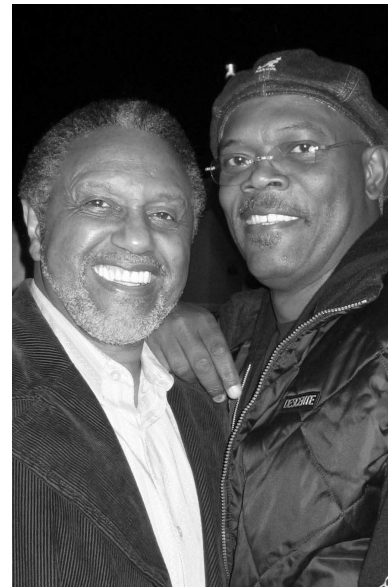
Mr. Weldon said, "When I first saw the reading of this play at the Lincoln Center I was sure they would grab it up. When they didn't, I approached Samm, who I've known for years. He said, 'I'd be proud to have the NEC do it. So, I jumped on it.'" Mr. Weldon explained the return of the NEC alumni to the new NEC is a large part of his mission for the NEC. However, he stated "when I took the reins I decided I was not going to solicit Denzel, or Sam and ask them

for anything. I was going to build it and they will come. And that's what I'm trying to do grassroots. And they will come. We've cleared up almost a million dollars in debt for that purpose."

Mr. Weldon states his objectives of taking the helm of the 30-year old institution are to produce new works by and about African-Americans for the company's extensive repertoire; develop young playwrights through its Playwrights Lab; groom young theatre professionals through the Intensive Training Program established by the company's founders, Douglas Turner Ward and Robert

Hooks; cultivate a new generation of theatrical producers through its Producer-in-Residence program; and oversee the company's innovative arts-in-education program that integrates the African-American theatre into school curricula.

"The Waiting Room" is a showcase and unfortunately cannot be extended past its limited engagement that ends on Sunday, April 1. A special closing fundraising gala and celebration honoring the women of the NEC will take place on April 1. For tickets call the NEC at (212) 582-5860.



NEC Artistic Director, Charles Weldon and Samuel Jackson at the NEC's production of Samm-Art Williams play, "The Waiting Room." Photo credit: Joan H. Allen

**WAITING TO UNLOAD**

*A Review: Samm-Art Williams' The Waiting Room*

BY TRACY "BINTA"  
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In the way that death can ignite family feuds, usually about money and inheritance, a life-threatening illness can sometimes lead to the unloading of explosive family secrets that might otherwise go with the dying to their graves. In Samm-Art Williams' "The Waiting Room," long-held secrets about family roots in a small Southern town are unburdened one by one, among a lively group of characters who find themselves in a hospital waiting room after one family's patriarch suffers a heart attack.

Uncle Pat and Aunt Jessie Innes, portrayed by Ed Wheeler and Elaine Graham, are the sick man's siblings, and the keepers of explosive family secrets until Uncle Pat, facing his own mortality in his brother's demise, feels compelled to unburden himself. He callously reveals one secret after another, eliciting righteous indignation from those about whom the truth is suddenly revealed.

Nearly everyone in the play—from Hanna Blake, the attending nurse, played by



"THE WAITING ROOM" cast Michael Chenevert, Gabrielle Lee, Charles Weldon, Ebony Jo-Ann, Elain Graham, Messeret Stroman, Ron Millkie, Samm-Art Williams, Ed Wheeler.

Photo credit: Carmen De Jesus

Gabrielle Lee, Rachaela, the young woman whose new born baby is being treated for a bad cold portrayed by Messeret Stroman, to the flirtatious Cookie, played by Ebony Jo-Ann, who is visiting her terminally ill sister—is forced to confront heretofore hidden truths in the waiting room. But the most explosive family secret is reserved for Riley Innes, the heart attack victim's son, played by Michael

Chenevert.

The plot thickens when the MacInneses, a white father and his son, played by Ron Millkie and David Cochran, who are close friends of Uncle Pat and Aunt Jessie enter the waiting room. Sporting a confederate flag emblazoned on his tee-shirt, the elder Gordon MacInnes, is unapologetic about his confederate roots, and refuses to back down when confronted as being a racist by

Riley Innes. He is proud to be a redneck, and posits that everyone is, since "if you slit anyone's throat, the color red is what you see."

The play is a farce that ridicules the notion of racial heritage in the American South, where Black and white family lineages are usually more intertwined than is generally recognized. But the play is not always funny, even when it is supposed to be. Likewise, some



Cast members Ed Wheeler, Ebony Jo-Ann, and Elaine Graham in a scene from "The Waiting Room."

Photo Credit: Carmen De Jesus

serious moments are met with derision by the audience. But in the end, the message that is clearly conveyed is that people are people, and family ties are important, regardless of who is in and who is not in it.

Some might object to the play's treatment of allegiance to the Confederacy as humor, and at times the script was too far-fetched for its own

good, but the superb acting by the entire cast makes this play worth seeing and sitting, if not laughing, through.

The Negro Ensemble Company, Inc.'s presentation of "The Waiting Room" runs through April 1 at the 45th Street Theatre, 354 West 45th Street, Manhattan. For tickets call (212) 279-4200.