

Time Out New York

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Theater

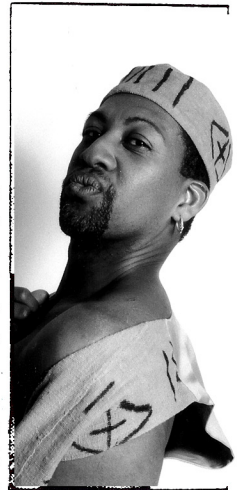
Sweet Sadie

**By Djola Branner.
Dir. Susan Finque.
With Branner.**

**Dixon Place (see
Off-Off Broadway).**

Djola Branner was not what his mother, Sadie, expected. Having already raised three children, Sadie was living in South Central, L.A., when, at age 42, she discovered she was pregnant. But motherhood was only the beginning of her midlife predicament: Branner, her fourth son, was "not like the other three." Instead of playing outdoors with friends, he spent hours drawing, eating and watching TV. He was isolated, frustrated and, well, different. "I figured it was because you were quiet, or chubby, or both," says Sadie, but the fact was that Branner is gay. Exhausted, neglectful and inappropriately seductive (she would dance erotically with her son, ask him to dress her and come into his room to stare at his penis), Sadie remained oblivious to her precocious son's emotional needs, dying in an Alzheimer's haze in 1992.

A founding member of POMO AFRO HOMOS, playwright and performance artist Branner brings his memories to the stage in *Sweet Sadie*, a one-person show that he wrote and in which he plays both himself and his troubled mother. The show exposes the sanctimony often attached to the ideal of the "self-sacrificing, saintly" black mother by focusing on Sadie's imperfections. But Branner doesn't lay blame or paint himself as a passive, perfect victim. Instead, he uses Oedipal drag as a means of creating both a kind of exorcism (ridding himself of his demons through performance) and an acknowledgement of an ongoing "possession," suggesting that Sadie remains an inescapable part of his body and soul. Branner's hard-won understanding of his mother's life and influence is what lifts *Sweet Sadie* above the dirty-laundry airing of so much performance art. This is no self-indulgent vendetta, but a serious work about a flirtatious mother written and performed by an artist who, in turn, flirts with (and seduces) his audience.—James Ireland Baker



Mama, can you hear me? Branner's elegy.



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