

## Stage Fight

Robert Lee Hardy Has Dedicated His Life Trying To Getting His Acting Thing Going  
by Jason Torres

Me, Myself, and Us | [March 2 and 3 at the Theatre Project](#). | For more information visit [www.theatreproject.org](http://www.theatreproject.org)



VOICES IN HIS HEAD: Local actor Robert Lee Hardy created a host of roles for himself with *Me Myself And Us*.

Robert Lee Hardy has a face you feel like you've seen before. And you might have, even if you're not plugged into the local theater community. The six-foot, twentysomething stage actor has appeared in a handful of locally produced productions: *A Real "Nigga" Show*, Al Leston Jr.'s *Julius X*, and a small part on an episode of *The Wire*. Hardy wrote, directs, and stars in his latest project, *Me, Myself, and Us*, which opens this weekend at Theatre Project. And while the young man born and raised in West Baltimore's Edmondson Village has put in his time studying in New York and auditioning in Hollywood, he sounds like an 80-year-old man when recalling how hard it was just to grow up here.

Hardy says he was the "weird" middle child between an eventual electric engineer and an athlete, and the neighborhood where he came up wasn't exactly hospitable to young guys who wanted to perform onstage. He remembers fighting to prove that he was still hood and not just odd. "Kids thought I was weird. It bothered me, but not enough to stop being myself," he says, sitting in a sparsely occupied midtown watering hole. He almost hulks over the bar, less a big guy than big in stature.

He takes a sip from his beer and shares how he decided he wanted to act--back in grade school. "I had a teacher, Diane Christopher," he says. "She held me after class one day and said, 'Since you like to talk so much in my class, I'm gonna have you talk your way out of this detention.' So she held me after for 45 minutes, [and] the whole time she didn't get a word in."

Every nuance of the story is painted as if he's either very introspective or he's rehearsed this bit in the mirror already, practicing for *Oprah*. "After that detention, she put me into a dramatic reading contest," Hardy recalls. "I came in first place. I ran outside to tell my mother I won and, as soon as I got into the street, I was hit by a car." He pauses dramatically before saying, "It's been a struggle ever since."

Hardy cites that accident--which he recalls in vivid detail, down to the shattered glass and the driver making eye contact before peeling off--as the moment when he knew that he had a gritty, uphill battle ahead of him. "I remember being 12. I used to walk through the graveyard, and there was a pond where I would just sit and write and think and pray because I felt misunderstood at home," he says. "I would write down different things that were bothering me and I would bury them in the graveyard. It wasn't until I got older that I realized, *Damn, I was on some deep shit even as a kid.*"

Hardy eventually ended up in Arena Players Youtheatre program, thanks to the local theater group's longtime friend Sandra Meekins, who worked at West Baltimore Middle School while Hardy attended it. "Sandra Meekins saved my life, and you can quote me on that," Hardy says. "She was a single grandmother raising eight grandchildren alone, but you would never see her frown, she was never in a bad mood, and she always had encouraging words. She pushed me, and if she didn't, I don't know where I woulda been."

Hardy credits Meekins with helping him get into Arena Players' after-school and summer programs while attending East Baltimore's Dunbar High School; he studied under Robert Chew, aka *The Wire*'s Proposition Joe. "I saw Hardy for the first time in 1994 and I instantly knew this kid was going to be a star," Chew recalls fondly. "I gave him some basic vocal training, but he was a natural-born actor, everything he did stood out. Whether the other performers were good or great, he stood out."

After high school Hardy studied acting at SUNY Purchase in upstate New York, and after graduation he jumped out to Los Angeles to hustle just like every other hopeful. "When I got to L.A., as soon as I touched the ground, I said, 'Wow, something great is gonna happen,'" Hardy recalls. Now, he's able to laugh about coming up empty, not even being able to book a local church play, but at the time it was tough to realize that he was headed back home in July 2002.

But Hardy kept working, co-writing and performing in *A Real "Nigga" Show* at Theatre Project, as well as a shorter version of *Me Myself and Us*. Last summer he worked in *Jazz in the Diamond District*, a movie set in Washington's go-go music scene alongside Wood Harris, which is slated for a 2007 release.

"I feel great now because it's all finally happening," he says. "Like with *The Wire*, I auditioned for three seasons and I finally got on. It was a short scene, but I acted my ass off in it."

Acting his ass off is all he wants to do. In *Me, Myself, and Us*, Hardy plays nine different characters, including Aunt Dot, an amalgamation of many of his actual aunts, a 5-year-

old boy roughly sketched from family and friends, a teacher, a preacher, a schizophrenic, a junkie, and others. The show also includes some August Wilson and Shakespeare excerpts tossed in for the benefit of enlightening the uninitiated younger folks in the crowd, and to show off a little bit.

Hardy says the heroin addict in the show has raised eyebrows from people who accuse him of playing to stereotypes. He says people have asked him why he's playing an addict if he studied theater. "I tell them that a junkie taught me how to put together a lawn mower and how to fix a flat tire," he laughs. "Most importantly, though, he taught me not to be him. He's a human being, a character, and he has a voice, too, and it deserves to be told."

And at the end of the day, Robert Lee Hardy is still that young man on some deep shit. He's still kind of weird, but he's not burying his thoughts in the ground anymore. "I thank God I wasn't born normal," he says. "If I woulda ended up becoming the person everyone wanted me to be, I wouldn't be able to touch so many people the way I am now."

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