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by Josh Ferri

BroadwayBox recently caught up with [Ben Vereen] the American Theatre Hall of Fame inductee to hear from him about the role he considers his career game-changer and was shocked to hear a wonderful story about Langston Hughes, 1965 Harlem, and a young man who would become a Broadway icon.

For me, the first game change was my first job. *The Prodigal Son* off-Broadway at the Greenwich Mews Theatre, in the basement, directed by Vinnette Carroll and written by Langston Hughes. I was on the boards—and of course other stuff came along, *Pippin* and *Roots*, and they were game-changers in my life—but the fact that you're working in this business is a game-changer. My life changed for the good. Langston Hughes chose *me*. We hung out; we had dinner; we became friends. This was magical.

I didn't know who Langston Hughes was until he took me to Harlem for the first time. I was a kid from Brooklyn and my whole world was Brooklyn—the Dodgers, the Apollo in Brooklyn, Coney Island. When someone told me I was going to Manhattan I thought I needed a passport; I really did. It was crazy going to Harlem with Langston Hughes. Going up the stairs to his little apartment, sitting with him, then him handing me a signed copy of his book *I Wonder as I Wander*. Talking to me about the renaissance and all the wonderful people there. I'm now writing a piece called *Harlem*, which deals with that whole period from World War I to World War II.

Providence had a big deal to do with my career. I believe in divine destiny and that people come into our lives for a reason. I believe that people have come into my life when I have felt like 'what am I doing here?' And then he shows up—a guy name Ray Cooper shows up and sends me to summer stock. One day I'm out of money and looking at backstage and there's *Sweet Charity*; I meet Bob Fosse and he becomes my mentor. Then I go to London with Sammy Davis, Jr. It's all been magically divine and I'm so thankful. That's what my show is about here [at 54]. A thank you to my audience.