

WRITING HIS WAY HOME

Photograph by Joshua Tyler Rivenbark

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMM-ART WILLIAMS

BY LAURA GRACE PATTILLO

Samm-Art Williams was born in 1946 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but when his parents separated his mother brought him back to the South as a young boy, and he has always considered Burgaw, North Carolina, his hometown. He has commented that he would never have left the small town in the southeastern part of the state if not for the necessity of employment. He went to Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland, where he earned a BA in political science in 1968, then studied extensively with the Freedom Theater's Acting Workshop in Philadelphia. In 1973, Williams became a member of the Negro Ensemble Company's Acting Repertory.

Williams is best known for his play *Home*, which had its origin in Williams's longing for Burgaw in the 1970s, as well as his feelings against the Vietnam War. He was working as an actor with the Negro Ensemble Company in New York at the time he wrote this play and feeling a little homesick. Traveling home for Christmas on a Greyhound bus, he began to write a poem that later grew into the play dedicated to his mother and the people of Burgaw, the basis for the play's settings in a fictional town called Cross Roads, North Carolina.

This play, *Home*, is the story of Cephus Miles, a young African American man who has lived all his life in rural

Cross Roads. He fully expects to marry his childhood sweetheart, Pattie Mae, and live with her on the farm for the rest of his life. However, Pattie Mae goes away to college to become a teacher and subsequently marries a lawyer in the city. Then Cephus goes to prison after refusing to go to Vietnam when he is drafted into the Army. While he is in prison, his aunts are forced to sell the farm to pay the taxes, and two of his friends who did go to Vietnam are killed. When Cephus is finally released, he is too ashamed to go home, so he moves to a large northern city and tries to make a new start. He finds a menial job, then loses it when his employer discovers his prison record, and he begins a descent into the city's underworld of loose women, liquor, and drugs. He winds up homeless, periodically living on the streets, and longing for the past. Somehow, a letter reaches him from home, in which his aunt tells him to come home, that a mysterious "Mr. P. Harper" has bought the old family farm deed in Cephus's name. Cephus travels south at Christmas on a bus filled with African Americans going home from the city for the holidays. When he arrives, he discovers how much the South has changed while he was away and reunites with loved ones, including Pattie Mae (divorced now), who turns out to be "P. Harper" (Harper

Samm-Art Williams is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at the 4th annual Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, hosted by the J.Y. Joyner Library at East Carolina University, 28-29 September 2007.