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From Milwaukee to Broadway and Back
A conversation with Chike Johnson

By Marie Kohler



Chike Johnson, featured recently in the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's *A Raisin in the Sun*, has moved back to Milwaukee. Born in Nigeria, schooled in Milwaukee, hired by Broadway, film and television, Chike talks about his life and theatrical career.

Tell me, briefly, the story of your life.

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1973 to American parents. My mother's from Milwaukee, my dad's from Washington, D.C. He was the basketball coach for the Nigerian national team and then for Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. When I was 12 and graduated from sixth grade, my mom said, "I want to go back home." So we moved to Milwaukee. My Dad stayed. I went to Forest Park Middle School, Franklin High School, and then joined the Marine Corps for four years. Then I came back and attended UW-Milwaukee.

Had you thought about theater as a career at that point?

No, I wanted to be a reporter! But I took an elective: Raeleen McMillion's class, "The Actor's Art." She showed us a video of Sally Fields describing how hard it is to cry on cue. I was fascinated. After class I went to Raeleen and asked if she would tutor me. She looked at me real hard for a while and said "Sure." It's because of her I got into theater. Once a week she taught me. I learned Shakespeare's Hotspur monologue. I auditioned for the Professional Theater Training Program (PTTP) at UWM and got in. After acting in Milwaukee for a couple of years, I moved to Chicago. The Goodman Theatre production of *Ruined* that I was in moved to Off-Broadway and won every kind of award—the playwright, Lynn Nottage, won the Pulitzer. Producers wanted to take it to Broadway, but only if they changed the cast to get big names. Lynn refused to do that.

Wow. That takes a lot of integrity. But you ended up living and performing there?

Yes, for four years. I did Encores! *Lost in the Stars* at City Center, *Wit* with Cynthia Nixon at Manhattan Theater Club, TV and film work. I'll be in the Broadway adaptation of John Grisham's novel, *A Time to Kill* opening Oct. 20.

But you and your wife Malkia Stampley, also a professional actor and singer, have decided it's nicer basing your family here in Milwaukee?

Yup. Raising our three kids. I can still be wherever I'm needed by the next day if my agent calls me. My mother's here. Malkia's family is here--she's performing in and co-founding Bronzeville Arts Ensemble. We decided that it wasn't worth the downsides for us in New York. On Broadway, I think theater is more business than art. So much is about money--producers want a sure thing. I won't lie—I do want to make money, but I admire so many brilliant actors here and in Chicago. I think a good show is a good show—in Milwaukee or on Broadway.

Photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express

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