'Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell Their Tales'

7 p.m. April 6

Arena Theatre, Michigan State University, East Lansing

Free

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In E. Patrick Johnson's world, sweet tea is more than just a tradition of southern hospitality - it's a delicious metaphor for the juiciest gossip. On April 6, he'll offer up a pitcher's worth, in a free performance of his candid one-man play, "Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell Their Tales," at the Arena Theatre on the campus of Michigan State University.

The production, which is based on Johnson's book "Sweet Tea: An Oral History of Black Gay Men of the South," was, itself, inspired by a session of "tea pouring."

"About 14 years ago, I was in Washington, D. C. for a summer cookout, sponsored by this HIV/AIDS advocacy group," said Johnson, a professor of African-American studies at Northwestern University. "There was a group of older black gay men sitting around and telling stories about growing up in the South and this whole little subculture of black gay men, and I was just spellbound by these stories."

Afterwards, Johnson decided that at some point, he wanted to chronicle stories like the ones passed at the picnic. Nine years later, in 2004, he took a sabbatical, traveled across 15 southern states and interviewed nearly 80 black gay men, ultimately producing his second book (in addition to co-editing "Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology") and laying the ground work for "Pouring Tea."

In adapting the work to the stage, Johnson has trimmed an extensive collection of stories down to eight deeply personal narratives, which focus, thematically, on issues ranging from religion to family life, sexual identity, racism and love - all challenging common misconceptions about growing up gay in the southern United States.

"A lot of it ('Pouring Tea') has to do with the South being a place where a number of things that are considered taboo are just not discussed," Johnson said. "The way in which people deal with sexuality - and not just homosexuality, sexuality in general - is different from the way people in the North deal with it, in the West, even to some extent, the Midwest. So that's one distinction. The other is that the relationship people have to community is different."

Johnson also asserts that black gay men are more plentiful in the South than one might initially suspect, and the breadth of narratives included in "Pouring Tea" is proof positive. The work's voices range from
the reminiscences of a 91-year-old man, to candid talk by a 21-year-old, to a transsexual from Johnson's hometown of Hickory, N. C. Their experiences are often heartbreaking - at times, achingly funny - but all bear a uniquely Southern accent.

"When they talk about growing up in the South, their relationship to their community and the land is very different than someone growing up in the urban North. You don't hear stories about people in New York climbing trees or running in open fields or sharecropping or helping to work in the fields," said Johnson. "And it's that kind of relationship to geography that influences people's relationship to their own sexuality. For instance, there's stories about people, adult men, who had their first sexual experience in a corn field or had their first experience in an outhouse."

Johnson is quick to point out that cultural differences are as powerful as geographical ones.

"The South is, in some respects, a difficult place for the LGBT community, especially those that want to express their sexuality in an open way," Johnson said. "But the other side is that there are people who are expressing their sexuality and are very happy, but they're not doing it the same way as people in some other city like New York or L. A. or even Chicago, for that matter, because they make the decision that they want to remain in the South, and they want to engage in certain performances that make the South what it is."

Like the book that spawned "Pouring Tea," the production is a poignant look at the forces that divide our nation across lines of race, class and sexuality, but structured as a performance piece. The work bounds off the page to give audiences an extremely personal connection. Though Johnson has performed the work more than 30 times since debuting it in 2006, the single-performance East Lansing engagement promises to be a refreshing theatrical drink, as sweet as the Southern staple referenced in its title.