Talk
By Carl Hancock Rux. Dir. Marion McClinton. With ensemble cast.
Public Theater (see Off Broadway).
If after seeing Carl Hancock Rux’s
new work (which I recommend
doing immediately) you feel woozy,
exhausted and bewildered, don’t
worry—you just made it through the
most intellectually ambitious play in
years. Talk is what it’s called, and that’s
what it should generate long after its
demanding three hours. An encyclope-
dic excavation of mid-20th-century
ideas about art, race and history, this
unique event is not easy to absorb in
one sitting. Better to listen hard and try
to keep up with the furious conceptual
riffs Rux (also a musician and spoken-
word artist) madly plays.
Talk is framed as a panel discussion
on obscure 1950s novelist and film-
maker Archer Aymes, a fictional meld
of Anaxole Broyard and Ralph Ellison,
whose prose sounds a bit like Gertrude
Stein’s. The young, earnest Moderator
(Anthony Mackie) introduces us to
Aymes with a reading from his first and
only book, Mother and Son. Afterward,
the young man indicates that his interest
in Aymes sprang from a desire to make
peace with his ancestors. “We are taught
to advance. To walk forward from
the place of our beginning,” the Moder-
ator says. “Welcome—to regression.”
Psychobabble, it turns out, is just one
mode among the blizzard of discourses
to come once the Moderator introduces
a panel that discusses Aymes as
artist, celebrity, African-American
and revolutionary.
Most of the play is occupied with
speechifying and squabbling among
four of the subject’s contemporaries,
whom Rux has named after Platonic
dialogues. There’s the feisty journalist
Dion (James Hiembach), who claims
to have written the first and definitive bi-
oography of Aymes; the art-film diva,
Phaedo (Maria Tucci), who starred in
Aymes’s movie of his novel; a terribly
naive former talk-show host, Memo
(John Seitz), who interviewed the writer;
and an activist and musician, Crito
(Reg E. Cathey), who shared an Atlanta
prison cell with Aymes during a civil-
rights march. Hovering on the sidelines
is Appolodorus (Karen Kandel), a per-
formance artist who knew the man’s
sexually adventurous side.
What emerges from the discussion?
“Too much to catalog here. The history
of the Beats, early television, civil rights,
Surrealism and avant-garde film are
breathtakingly inventoried by the pan-
els, who fiercely dispute each other’s
record and interpretation. After a while,
Aymes begins to resemble an African
American Zelig, the Woody Allen char-
acter who pops up throughout history.
James Noon’s marvelous Hellenistic
set, like the characters’ names, alludes to
antiquity, but the real precedent-setter
for Talk is Orson Welles, not Socrates.
Like Citizen Kane, Talk shows what hap-
pens when you take a life and peel away
its layers. The more you peel, the
more the man disappears. The
very name of Rux’s invisible
man is a pair of slippery homo-
phones. Is Archer to be read as
noun or adjective? Is Aymes verb
or noun? Is all this yackety-yack
and name-dropping about zero-
ing in, or is there a more ironic,
oblique goal in mind?
Rux may be drunk on re-
search and theory (a 20-minute
coda about Pentheus and Bac-
chus is an overindulgent mess),
but he’s willing and able to com-
plicate assumptions about art
and race with humor and ele-
gance. Coupled with Marion
McClinton’s precise, masterful
orchestration of voices and
painterly tableaux, Talk wins the
case for a renewed theater of
ideas.—David Cote

Critics’ picks
Talk
(Off Broadway) Conceived as a panel
discussion by Carl Hancock Rux, this
dazzling new work dissects art and
race in mid-20th century America—as
experienced by fictional novelist
Archer Aymes.

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JUST THE FACTS, MAVAM Mackle’s Moderator,
left, wants the true story from film diva Tucci.