

SERIOUSLY SPEAKING

W. Kamau Bell embraces dual roles of comedian and activist



W. Kamau Bell will perform multiple shows on April 25 and 26 at the Den Theatre.

AUNDRE LARROW

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W Kamau Bell has a reputation for doing things some people say he shouldn't do.

First, it was talking to the Ku Klux Klan. Next, it was interviewing white nationalist Richard Spencer. Then, it was directing a documentary about the rise and fall of Bill Cosby.

Add February's appearance at the Kennedy Center to that list. Bell faced some backlash for performing at the venue after President Donald Trump installed himself as chairman.

But Bell took the stage, criticized Trump, and discussed a host of social and political issues. He

said his audience was depending on him to speak to the moment in a funny and thoughtful way.

"As a stand-up comedian, this is where we thrive," said Bell, 52, who lives in Oakland. "Especially the ones who are in the tradition of Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory. We're in the 'speak truth to power' game."

Chicagoans will get a taste of Bell's brand of comedy when he returns to the city where he graduated high school and began his career, for shows April 25 and 26 at the Den Theatre — just days after ABC airs his turn as a finalist on "Celebrity Jeopardy!"

During the last Trump administration, Bell was hosting the Emmy-winning "United Shades of America" on CNN. Though he

W. KAMAU BELL

When: April 25 at 7:15 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.; and April 26 at 7:15 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.

Where: The Den Theatre, 1331 N. Milwaukee Ave.

Tickets: \$29+

Info: thedentheatre.com

is no longer working for a major network, he is no less busy. In addition to his "Who's With Me?" tour, he is also promoting his essay in Michael Lewis' book, "Who is Government?," a timely celebration of federal workers. He is also running his own media production company, hosting a podcast for the ACLU, sharing his views on Substack, and showing up to demonstrations like the recent "Hands Off" protest in

Oakland.

He said he is resolute in his commitment to being an activist and making his opinions known.

"Basically, nobody can fire me," he said. "So, I feel free to say what I want to. Now, having said that, maybe I won't get hired by anybody again, but there's two things that are important: Making sure my family eats every day and has a place to sleep, and also making sure I'm clear about which side of history I'm on."

Bell said his approach to his career has been informed by his parents. His father climbed his way up in corporate America, often becoming the first Black person in his roles. His mother started her own self-publishing company because she couldn't find

a publisher to put out her book of Black quotations.

"My mom was an outside agitator and my dad was an inside agitator," he said. "I have the patience for both. Now, some people would say that doesn't make me easy enough to work with on the corporate side. And some people would say that doesn't make me 'lefty' enough on the activist side. But I also get to do things that other people aren't doing because I'm able to move between these worlds."

Growing up, Bell was accustomed to navigating different environments, living in multiple cities, including Boston and Mobile, Alabama. Following his graduation from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, he initially studied at the University of Pennsylvania. But he left to pursue comedy in the Windy City, while taking some classes at the Second City and Columbia College Chicago.

He did stand-up for the first time at No Exit Café in Rogers Park.

"I believe the comics had to pay 99 cents to perform because they knew the comics weren't going to buy anything," he said. "I got the compliment, 'You had great stage presence,' which is a way of saying, 'You didn't have any jokes, but you were fun.'"

But Bell kept going, due in part to the friends he made.

"It was a whole social scene where you're sort of like the Island of Misfit Toys, where everybody finds their crew," he said. "I wasn't doing well onstage, but it was a fun thing to be a part of."

Bell eventually moved to San Francisco where he sharpened his skills, worked his way up in the comedy scene and created a one-man show. He followed his TV show, "Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell," with his first comedy TV special, the CNN gig and a memoir. Since then, he has continued to build an impressive career as a writer, podcaster and filmmaker.

Besides having fun onstage, Bell is also enjoying "Celebrity Jeopardy!" fame. He said former "Jeopardy!" champions have reached out to offer their praise and support.

"Apparently the 'Jeopardy!' community is happy for me, so I feel good about that," he said. "It is a real tight-knit and proud community. And I think they feel like I'm doing well by them."