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BIG DREAM
FULFILLED
**LARRY L.
HAMLIN**

A celebration and reunion of spirit... (An) historic and culturally significant event.

These were the words producer and artistic director Larry Leon Hamlin used in describing the intent and impact of the 1991 National Black Theatre Festival. During the Opening night's-Gala Dinner Maya Angelou recounted the successes of the 1989 Festival, then, thanked Larry Leon for "dreaming such a big dream."

This year's Festival was again held in Winston-Salem from August 5th through August 10th. It was the second of what will hopefully become a bi-annual gala tradition in Black Theatre. For six days, folks from Birmingham to Bermuda, from Louisiana to Liberia participated in cultural activities and educational events which taught them about the complexities of theatre.

Free daily workshops took participants behind the scenes, where they analyzed the various phases of production, from playwrighting, casting and imaging; to contracting and financing; to union vs. non-union and profit vs. non-profit considerations. Workshops were chaired by seasoned professionals: Bill Duke and Danny Glover conducted a workshop on filmmaking; award-winning playwright Ron Milner led one on playwrighting; a *Living Legends* seminar boasted brilliant veteran actors like Joe Seneca, Helen Martin, Moses Gunn, Esther Rolle and Douglass Turner Ward.

The Festival provided excellent opportunities for networking. Non-performing artists found a platform for themselves in the Festival Market Place where greeting cards, original oils and watercolors, lithographs, posters, artistic clothing, scented oils and fine hand-tooled leathers were on display. Ruby Dee autographed her books for sale. Michael Sargent peddled his science fiction audio drama. LaVon Williams' wood sculptures were in big demand. Obayana Ajanaku soldered precious metals before spectator's eyes into beautiful original jewelry.

But the Festival's focus was, as its name clearly states, Black Theatre. And Black Theatre dressed up and showed out like only Black Theatre can. Each day was named after one or two celebrities who were to host the evening's reception. The stars were pre-selected and publicized, but-an unofficial poll was tallied and talked about the following day. For example, Monday was officially named



Photo: Fredric Michaels

National Black Theatre Festival An Artistic Hajj

August 3, 2015 launched the 26th year of the *National Black Theatre Festival's* tradition of bringing together an eclectic community of performers and patrons for an international celebration and reunion of spirit. Winston-Salem, NC becomes Black Theatre Holy Ground for a bi-annual pilgrimage that baptizes hundreds of newbies and inspires thousands of returnees to make the artistic hajj. Executive Producer Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin was always the wind beneath the wings of Larry Leon Hamlin (September 25, 1948-June 6, 2007), her visionary husband that created and produced the NBTF for eighteen years.

And Sylvia seamlessly assumed the helm of the Festival after the early passing of Larry Leon, vowing that the Festival would not die with her husband. True to her word, every NBTF since 2007 has been bigger and better!

Black Stars of the Great White Way – A Chapman Roberts Concept opened the

festival with a multi-media pageant of past and present Broadway divas and divos that featured Norm Lewis, Maurice Hines, Melba Moore, Andre DeShields, Ebony Jo-Anne and others performing the timeless tunes of Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Geoffrey Holder, and others. A sampling of the eclectic edutainment offered for the week



Photo: Fredric Michaels

Exec. Producer Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin and grandson Jaquan
Photo: Fredric Michaels

after Denzel Washington. But the unofficial poll chose the African Drum Ensemble, Helen Martin and Carol Woods, the headliner act for opening night. It began with a powerful "song" of drums that called forth and paid tribute to God and our ancestors. Denzel's Gala Dinner speech didn't stand a chance against Helen Martin's Living Legends Awards speech, which began (paraphrased quote) "I know I wasn't asked to speak. but I got somethings to say...". And Carol Woods belted out a song, from the musical *Blues in the Night*—the audience jumped to its feet and gave her a rousing ovation that lasted for several minutes. Tuesday night, Avery Brooks moved a 1300 plus member audience to laughter and tears and song in an incomparable performance of the one-man show, *Paul Robeson*. He took seven curtain calls and had, easily, another seven to take had he not been interrupted with the untimely bestowal of a Festival plaque.

Unquestionably, the night belonged to Avery Brooks. for whom it was named, but the day belonged to Joe Seneca. During the Living Legends seminar, he recited an original poem entitled BAHMA. It filled the audience with pride and hope so fierce that they called to him, and applauded, and wept openly during the thunderous standing ovation that followed.

This is an account of the first two days. The others were just as exciting. When the Festival came to an end, as all good things must, it finished with the same panache with which it began: the rich rhythmic call and response of African drums permeating the lobby and mezzanine of the posh Stouffer Hotel in salute to God, in salute to our ancestors, in celebration and reunion of spirit.

The 1991 National Black Theatre Festival was truly an historic and culturally significant event. Thank you.

—Perri Gaffney



Maurice Hines, ?, Vanessa Bell Calloway.

include: *Fetch Clay, Make Man*, a fanciful journey of the stranger-than-life friendship between Stepin Fetchit and Cassius Clay; *The Journals of Osborne P. Anderson*, recounting the story of five black men who participated in John Brown's Harpers Ferry; *Mr. Joy*, one of Daniel Beaty's signature solo performances, featuring a wide-range of characters that echo the beauty and brilliance, and senseless violence and death that continue to plague urban Americana; *Maid's Door*, a nonlinear exploration of a woman's descent into Alzheimer; *The Clothesline Muse*, celebrating the movement of enterprising Georgian washer women told through beautiful dance, song, and innovative videos; *GoGo and Big Sister*, a Cape Town, South African trio touched upon familiar familial rifts and AIDS/HIV, and made 2015 an international festival; *An Evening with Vivian Reed* announced the return of the two-time Tony nominated singer/actress (*Bubbling Brown Sugar, Three More Divas*) to the stage where she thanked Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin every night for keeping Larry

Leon's legacy alive and thriving for its immeasurable impact and importance. And that barely scratches the surface of the variety of talent and dramatic themes on stage at the 2015 National Black Theatre Festival.

Did I mention celebrities? Scores of celebrity sightings were made by the folk who search for them like bird-watchers seeking rare birds. Katori Hall (*Mountaintop*), Jackee Harry (*Another World, Room 227*), Darnell Williams (*All My Children*), Tonye Patano (*Weeds*), Ntozake Shange (*For Colored Girls*), Bill Cobbs (*I'll Fly Away, New Jack City*), Count Stovall (*A Streetcar Named Desire, Driving Miss Daisy*), Bern Nadette Stanis (*Good Times*) are just a few of the virgin and returning celebrities that came for special honors or to just hang out. Bill Cobbs received the *Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award*, Katori Hall received the *August Wilson Playwright Award*, Maurice Hines, Robert Hooks, and Hattie Winston received *Living Legends Awards*, to mention just a few.





Ms. Vivian Reed

Photo: Fredric Michaels

Celebrities support and promote fledgling artists and reveal little known facets of their own talents. Tommy Ford (*Martin, Harlem Nights*) also writes illustrated children's books and hosted a library event during the Festival. Ted Lange (*Love Boat*) is a long-time NBTF celebrity participant and dubs himself a "footnote historian" to describe his process as a playwright. Lange takes critical moments in history where blacks have played key roles but whose participation has been reduced to a footnote, then fleshes out the bigger truth of our contributions in plays that inform and uplift as well as entertain. Debbi Morgan (*All My Children, Eve's Bayou*) returned to perform the one-woman show adapted from her autobiography, *The Monkey on My Back!*, bravely and candidly describing how she overcame a history of abuse and fear. Chester Gregory, whose career was launched from the Festival stage in 2001, returned for a command encore of *The Eve of Jackie: A Tribute to Jackie Wilson* with his inimitable replication of the legendary Jackie Wilson that he claims will be the last time... but no one believes that!

Youth Events continued to attract youth and elders alike: *The Midnight Poetry Jam* at the convention center literally draws thousands nightly; *TeenTastic*, tailored to young people ages 13-17, had their own venue this year; the *free FilmFest* ran feature-length and short films and documentaries throughout the day everyday at *a/perture*, a quaint movie house located on 4th Street renamed Larry Leon Hamlin Way during the Festival; there was a morning *Storytelling Festival* in the ballroom of the Embassy Suites: a *National Youth Talent Showcase* at the convention center, and much more.

Career enhancing workshops taught by industry professionals introduced greater ways to breakout of tired, old, constraining habits and break into exciting and innovative methods of promoting and producing work in the ever morphing world of edutainment. *Soap*

Talk! Web Series was a celebrity panel discussion with Count Stovall (*All My Children, Driving Miss Daisy*), Lamman Rucker (*Meet the Browns, As The World Turns*), Mikki Grant (*Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope*), and Chrystee Pharris (*Passions, General Hospital*) discussing how today's technology has altered the way a performer markets and brands themselves, from long distance auditioning to arriving with a following of thousands on social media. *Celebrity Talk* was a panel discussion with Count Stovall, Barbara Montgomery (*Amen, All My Children*), Hattie Winston (*The Electric Company, Spidey Super Stories*), and Dawnn Lewis (*A Different World, Hangin' With Mr. Cooper*) handling questions from the Actors Equity union perspective about the value of the union and how to become a union member, they also shared personal stories on how they joined Equity, and discussed changes in codes and contracts like the *Larry Leon Hamlin Code* that allows Equity actors to perform at NBTF. Other workshops included *What's the Story? A discourse on script writing*, and *Show Me The Money!* Covering strategies on raising moolah for movies, and so much more.

Garland Lee Thompson, Sr. (*Star Trek, The Legend of Johnny Blue Eyes*) co-founded *Frank Silvera's Writers Workshop* in 1973, and he fathered the *NBTF Readers' Theatre* to develop, encourage, and promote playwrights. One example of that series' influence is that in 1991 they presented John Henry Redwood's *The Old Settler*. Since then, countless productions have been mounted, awards have been garnered, Debbie Allen and Phylicia Rashad produced, directed, and performed *The Old Settler* for PBS-TV in 2001, and this year the Ensemble Theatre of Houston, TX brought *The Old Settler* back full circle as one of the NBTF lineup of shows. Garland made his transition November 18, 2014, and a commemoration and celebration of his life and legacy was done in *Three Acts*. *Act I* was a Memorial service at St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem, followed by *Act II* a Presentation – Reception at Theatre for the New City in NYC's East Village on February 14, 2015. *Act III* was a second star-studded gala of sorts in the Ballroom of the Cherry Street Marriott Hotel. His *Readers Theatre* continues to receive more scripts than can be read. Watch a video tribute to Garland at: <https://youtu.be/sGZlwcAe5W4>. African drummers and dancers including one on stilts opened the Festival, and then closed it with a parade that covered a large sweep of the city and midway offered libations to the artists who have joined the ancestors including Dr. Maya Angelou, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Garland Lee Thompson, Sr., and other NBTF devotees, and always Larry Leon Hamlin who dared to dream this big dream!

—Perri Gaffney