

STEEL MAGNOLIA

Sprinkle-Hamlin earns kudos for carrying on

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

The age-old adage that behind every good man stands a good woman certainly applied to the Larry Leon Hamlin.

The late, great creator of the National Black Theatre Festival married well in 1981 when he exchanged vows with the former Sylvia Yvonne Sprinkle, a country girl with a smile that was just as bright as her future.

The same year of their union, Hamlin founded the state's first black professional theater, the N.C. Black Repertory Company, and Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin was by his side. As the company grew in stature and depth, she became Hamlin's most trusted advisor, and with the 1989 creation of the National Black Theatre Festival, Sprinkle-Hamlin became even more of the wind beneath Hamlin's wings.

Now, with her beloved gone, Sprinkle-Hamlin is at a place where she has never stood before — center stage, beneath the spotlight.

"She has really handled mainly a lot of the business side," said Roz Fox, an actress who has been involved with the Black Rep and NBTF since their inception.

While Larry Leon Hamlin was blessed with an unmatched stage presence and abundant pizzazz, his wife's strengths are in other areas. Friends say she is endowed with a great knack for planning, strategizing, organizing and executing. Those skills have served Sprinkle-Hamlin well over her nearly 40-year career as a librarian. Today, she



Photo by Jason Pitt
Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin married Larry Leon Hamlin the same year he founded the N.C. Black Rep.

is the director of the Forsyth County Library, overseeing the county's 10 branches and devising ways to make sure the public library remains relevant in an age of iPods and Play Stations.

Her plate has been overflowing since her husband became ill last year. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that

his vision, the NBTF, is carried on.

"She has stepped up to the plate," said William Jenkins, the longtime chairman of the N.C. Black Rep's board.

But Jenkins said devoted supporters have added their arms so that Sprinkle-Hamlin, alone, has not had to carry the huge burden of keeping the fes-

tival afloat.

"Larry always used people to help him, and many of those people have been with us from the beginning," Jenkins said.

Fox is one of those people. Although she has relocated to New York, she returns whenever she is needed, something that she says she will continue to do. Fox said one of Sprinkle-Hamlin's greatest strengths is her ability to delegate duties and use others in areas where they can best serve.

"She is savvy enough to know that one person won't be able to fill (Hamlin's) shoes," said Fox. "You have to take his shoes and make a lot of little tiny shoes for a lot of different people."

Sprinkle-Hamlin has been praised for her grace and resilience over the last year, and especially since she became a widow in June. Arthur Sprinkle says those qualities did not just develop in his sister as a result of the trying time she experienced.

"She is very strong, always has been," he said.

Sprinkle doesn't think his late brother-in-law would have wanted his beloved festival left in the hands of anyone except his sister. He has faith in her and her ability to continue the festival and make it better than ever.

Poet Maya Angelou this week, expressed similar faith in Sprinkle-Hamlin. As Angelou thanked Hamlin for his contributions to the arts during Monday's kick-off gala, she added, "I equally thank Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin for her own insight, for her loyalty and her love. I know that Sylvia Hamlin will keep these dreams going."

ARTISTIC REUNION



Photo by Kevin Walker

Author/playwright Pearl Cleage is all smiles as she greets old friend Woody King.

GETTING AUTOGRAPHS EARLY



Photo by Kevin Walker

This theater-goer wasn't all too familiar with actor/playwright Layon Gray, but she wanted to get his autograph anyway. She is a smart woman. Gray, who is performing in "WEBEIME," which he also wrote, has received raves from critics and fans for his work.

Calloway

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While film and television work pay the bills, Calloway has had a love for the stage ever since she began dancing as a pre-teen in her native Cleveland, Ohio.

"(Theater) is what keeps your acting chops going," she said.

To fulfill her commitment to the NBTF, Calloway took a break from "The Divorce," the Donald Welch play she is currently doing in Los Angeles — the city that the devoted wife and mother calls home. In the play she portrays a woman who celebrates her divorce by inviting her best girlfriends to a festive soiree. Calloway leads an all-star cast that includes Dawn Lewis and "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" actress Tatyana Ali.

Even today — three years after Halle Berry's historic Oscar win — Hollywood is a battleground for black actresses, says Calloway.

"There is always gonna be racism and sexism. The playing field is still not even, and as a woman you experience a whole other thing when you are over 40," said Calloway, who is still stunning at 50.

Over the years, she has developed close bonds with her acting contemporaries. But make no mistakes about it, when it is time to audition for a part, it's every actress for herself.

"There is always competition because you are going to go in that room, and you are going to try to get the job like everybody else," Calloway said. "You have a mortgage to pay, you have private school tuition to pay..."



Photo by Kevin Walker

A trio of young fans pose with Vanessa Bell Calloway.

The seven-time NAACP Image Award nominee has been happily married to Dr. Anthony "Tony" Calloway, an anesthesiologist, for 19 years. By Hollywood standards, their union is an eternity. Calloway says that long ago they discovered the secret to a happy relationship.

"He gets me, and I get him. If nobody else gets us, we get each other," she said. "It makes life a lot easier."

Later this month, the Calloways will invite viewers into their home when "Vanessa Bell Calloway: In The Company of Friends" debuts on TV One. The show — which Calloway conceived and executive produces — will feature the actress preparing

some of her favorite meals for intimate dinner parties for her famous friends. She has already taped episodes of the reality-based show featuring guests like comedian Sinbad, James Pickens of "Grey's Anatomy" and husband and wife singing duo Chante Moore and Kenny Lattimore.

The Calloways have two teenage daughters, Ashley and Alexandra. Ashley is one of the young stars of the popular BET reality show "Baldwin Hills," which is an affluent, mostly African-American district of Los Angeles that has been dubbed "the black Beverly Hills."

"I am shocked more than anything," Calloway said of her daughter's budding small

screen stardom. "She was the kid that really didn't want anything to do with the business."

Calloway admits that sometimes the "what-ifs" get the best of her. She has given much thought to the roles she didn't get and the opportunities that fell through her hands. It has been only recently that she has taken the time to reflect on her work as an actress. She concedes that even she is impressed by what she has accomplished.

"I am proud," she said confidently. "It is only years later that you say 'Oh my God!' because you realize that it was really something significant that you did."

NOTES



A young fan readies her camera phone to take a picture with Darryl Hunt.

Hunt adjusts to stardom

There is a new star among the droves of famous faces at this year's National Black Theatre Festival. His name is Darryl Hunt.

Locally, he has been a famous figure for justice and injustice, faith and dignity. Now the world knows of Hunt's nearly two decades of imprisonment for a rape and murder he had nothing to do with.

HBO began airing "The Trials of Darryl Hunt" earlier this year. The documentary follows his 20 year struggle to convince a racially-biased criminal justice system that he did not kill a white female newspaper copy editor. Hunt's pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears. He was convicted, with the help of faulty police evidence, by an all-white jury in the 1980s. Only the vote of a single juror spared him from the death penalty. Although, he managed to win the right for a new trial, he was again, convicted by a jury that was nearly all-white.

DNA evidence finally won Hunt his freedom on Christmas Eve in 2003. Since his release, Hunt has been a strong advocate of criminal justice system reform and a fighter for others who have been wrongfully convicted through his foundation, The Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice.

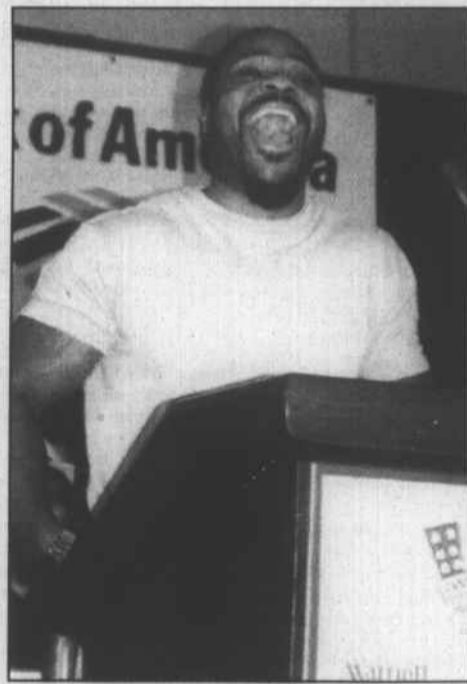
Hunt and his lovely wife, April, have been enjoying the festival this week. The couple attended the Opening Night Gala and have plans to see several plays. Hunt is still surprised that he now has fans of his own.

Tuesday, several people made a beeline for Hunt, requesting pictures and autographs.

"It's kind of weird," said the soft-spoken Hunt, "because I don't consider myself to be anyone other than who I am ... it is very humbling."

There will be a special screening of "The Trials of Darryl Hunt" tomorrow (Aug. 3) at the Central Library (660 W. Fifth St.) at 11 a.m. A Q & A session with Hunt will follow. Hunt says he doesn't mind the fame if he can use it to promote his cause.

"The more people know about me, the more they hear about the issues we are trying to fight for," he said.



Malcolm-Jamal Warner is all laughs at Monday's news conference.

Free time for Malcolm-Jamal

Few faces have become more familiar at the biennial National Black Theater Festival than that of the talented actor, writer and musician, Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

Warner's role as Theo Huxtable on "The Cosby Show" plunged him into the spotlight at an early age; making him a household name for many '80s babies, and the object of millions of teenaged girls' crushes.

Since that time, Warner has spread his wings and gone back to theater, taking on theater with a new sense of resolve and forming the urban jazz/funk band, Miles Long, which will be performing at the Benton Convention Center Saturday at midnight.

"I always say any actor worth his salt is always going to go back to theater because it's just a whole different (experience)," Warner said. "It's the foundation but it's a whole different set of muscles that you don't get to use when you're doing film or television."

Warner, who was first introduced to theater at nine, says the NBTF affords him the unique opportunity to reunite with childhood confidants.

"I love it because I grew up with so many of the actors here," he remarked. "It's always like a reunion for us."

Though he usually experiences the festival from the stage, as he did in 2003 with his one-man show entitled "Love and Other Social Issues," Warner says he is eager to just be a spectator this year.

"I'm just excited because it's the first one I'm not bringing a production here, so it frees me up to be able to see some shows," he said. "I'm looking forward to being able to have the time to see some shows."