

Notes

NBTF FANS MEET THE REAL VANESSA WILLIAMS

This marks the very first National Black Theatre Festival for Vanessa Williams – the original one.

She said that she has heard good things about the festival for years from friends and colleagues on the West Coast. Williams came this year to see for herself. Monday afternoon, even before the NBTF officially got underway, Williams said she was already exited.



Vanessa Williams

"I have been goose-bumpy since I got on the plane," she said.

She was even more thrilled once she got to town and started to bump into old friends like Set Designer Felix Cochran, who she worked with at the Billie Holiday Theatre in New York when she was a 19-year-old newbie to the industry.

"That is when I knew that I could do this (act) for a living," she said.

Williams – famous for her work on the landmark cable television drama "Soul Food" and films like "New Jack City," is often mistaken for the other Vanessa Williams, the former Miss America who has established herself as a noted singer and actress. The latter, though, is known as Vanessa L. Williams since the "Soul Food" actress was already well-established and listed with the Screen Actors Guild and Actor's Equity under the name Vanessa Williams.

Williams hopes to return to the NBTF in the future to perform. The actress has a one-woman performance piece, "Feet on the Ceiling," that she has developed over the years. She said she has also been thinking about developing a stage piece about the legendary Shirley Chisholm, the late congresswoman who was the first serious black candidate for U.S. president.



Photo by Kevin Walker

Julie Dash signs an autograph for a fan.

DASH: DON'T WAIT FOR INVITATION TO DIRECT

Black writers, producers, directors and performers have long-known that the stage is the place to go to tell their own stories – and not some Hollywood studio executive's version of what he thinks the black story should be.

Julie Dash says black film directors would be well-served if they adopted that do-it-yourself credo as well. Dash knows what she's talking about. She's in the history books as the first black female director of a widely-distributed major motion picture – 1991's "Daughters of the Dust." Since that milestone, a few other black women have stood behind the camera – ladies like Kasi Lemmons (Eve's Bayou) and Gina Prince-Bythewood (Love and Basketball). But Dash is not yet satisfied – far from it.

"There are not nearly enough (black women directors)," she said. "We need much more."

Dash says change will come only when the powers that be break that status quo and start considering black female directors for projects that are handed to white men almost as a matter of habit.

But Dash doesn't believe in just sitting around and waiting to get noticed by some higher-up. She is a child of the independent film movement. Make your own films and tell your own stories, she tells up-and-coming filmmakers.

"And then let them (Hollywood executives) come find you," said Dash, whose long list of directing credits also includes "The Rosa Parks Story" and MTV's "Love Song."

Dash is working on a number of projects currently. She laughs when people ask her why she has not done any films since the acclaimed "Daughters of the Dust." In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

"I have been working steadily since then," she said.

Tony winner adds an NBTF honor to her growing trophy case

'Color Purple' actress attends very first NBTF

BY LAYLA FARMER THE CHRONICLE

Among this year's newcomers to the National Black Theatre Festival is LaChanze – the actress best-known for playing Celie in the Broadway production of Oprah Winfrey's "The Color Purple." LaChanze (pronounced La-Shawns) helped perfect the beloved character from the famed novel by Alice Walker for the stage, so much so that she won a Tony in 2006 for Best Actress in a Musical.

"It was a wonderful experience to be working with that material," she said.

The native of St. Augustine, Fla., is a veteran of the stage, with more than two decades of experience under her belt. She's done an international tour of "Dreamgirls," and won wide acclaim for her role in "Once on this Island," for which she received a Tony nomination, a Drama-Desk nomination and a Theatre World Award. This summer she starred in a revival of "The Wiz" with songstress Ashanti and actor Orlando Jones.

And her resume continues to grow. She recently released her debut solo album, "Love LaChanze," and is currently working on a children's book – "My Little Diva."

A busy stage schedule has kept her away from previous NBTFs, LaChanze said, but



Photo by Kevin Walker

LaChanze, right, poses with actress Starletta DuPois.

she was happy to have been able to finally make it to town to witness for herself an event she said she's heard so much about.

"I've been wanting to come for a long time," LaChanze commented, adding that she was "overwhelmed" by the excitement

of being surrounded by so many of her peers.

The NBTF honored the accomplished actress with a Special Recognition Award at its Opening Night Gala and Awards Ceremony Monday night at the Benton Convention Center.

LaChanze said she was

honored to receive the recognition.

"This is when you know that you are doing something right, when the people that you work with stop and acknowledge you," she declared. "I feel very touched by this."

LaChanze's plane touched down in the Triad not long before Monday's noon opening press conference, where she was introduced to thunderous applause. The actress said afterwards that she was still soaking it all in.

"I just got here," she explained. "I walked into this experience, and I'm just overwhelmed with all the beautiful black people."

LaChanze was tight lipped about her next role as details are still under wraps, but she said the public would be hearing more from her very soon.

LaChanze currently resides in Westchester, New York, with her husband, Derek Fordjour, and their three children, Langston Fordjour, Celia Gooding and Zaya Gooding. The singer/actress was eight months pregnant with her second daughter, Zaya, when her first husband, Calvin Gooding, was killed in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. The 38-year-old Gooding was a partner at the financial firm Cantor Fitzgerald, which was headquartered in the doomed towers.

For more information about LaChanze, visit www.lachanze.com.

Moore

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"After I got the job, Mahalia told me 'I'm so glad you got that part because they was worrying me to death,'" Moore said while smiling and imitating Jackson's southern accent.

Jackson did have a part in the film, delivering a stirring rendition of "Trouble of the World."

This was Moore's first time at the National Black Theatre Festival. She came to pick up a Living Legend Award, and to support her grandson, Kirk Kelley-Kahn, who produced the play "Reunion in Barbersville." Grandmother and grandson have been joined at the hip for as long as both can remember.

"She has been there for me when no one else has been there," said Kelley-Kahn, who inherited his grandmother's acting chops.

She was squarely in his corner last year when he started making plans to revive the venerable Cambridge Players, a Los Angeles theater company started by the late Ed Cambridge and made famous by those who starred in its productions – people like Moore, Esther Rolle, Beah Richards and Helen Martin. In fact, Kelley-Kahn made his stage debut in the company's production of "The Amen Corner" when he was just an adolescent.

The company had died when Cambridge passed away, and Kelley-Kahn concedes that there were some who wanted it to stay that way. They shot down his idea of creating Cambridge Players – Next Generation.

"There were people that told me that it wasn't going to happen," he said.



Photo by Kevin Walker

Juanita Moore and her grandson, Kirk Kelley-Khan, at the Opening Night Gala.

But his grandmother knew better. She encouraged her grandson to push on, even fronting him some money for the venture. Kelley-Khan jokes that she asks to be repaid everyday.

"Barbersville" is the first of what Kelley-Khan hopes will be many productions for the new Cambridge Players.

Moore, now 86, still acts, "if the right part comes along." In the last few years she's turned in memorable performances on the television shows "Judging Amy" and "ER" and in the Disney film, "The Kid." While one would expect her to name "Imitation of Life" as the favorite of her more than 30 films, Moore says the movie doesn't even rank near to the great experience she had filming 1952's "Affair in

Trinidad" with Rita Hayworth and Glenn Ford.

"Glenn was helpful ... I don't know if he was flirting with me or not, but he told me that 'I can look into your eyes and I can see star quality,'" Moore recalled before her grandson chimed in: "He was flirting with you," which made them both laugh.

Kelley-Khan is also convinced that Alfred Hitchcock had a thing for his grandmother. Moore starred in many episodes of his "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour" in the 1960s. She shook her head and smiled at her grandson's insinuation and simply said of Hitchcock: "I loved him."

Moore admits that it is difficult to outlive so many friends and colleagues. Most of all the original Cambridge

Players have passed on, and of the "Imitation of Life" cast, only she and Susan Kohner, who played her daughter, are living. Lana Turner died in 1995 and Sandra Dee passed away a decade later.

"I am thankful. God has left me here for a reason," she proclaimed.

Moore still gets fan mail from people across the world, many of whom see "Imitation of Life" for the first time and are moved by her performance. Just recently, a man from Europe sent her a letter with \$20 inside – presumably a fee to cover the two autographed photos he requested.

"She sent them to him and sent the money back too," said Kelley-Khan, who is proud that his grandmother has become a legend in a league where few others exist.

But Moore has never thought of herself in such terms. Although she paved the way for those who have come after her, Moore's always considered herself just a working actress – not an icon. But the attention she has received this week at the Theatre Festival has her mind now open to that possibility.

"Since I have been here, I am thinking about it," she said with her trademark smile in place.

One of Kelley-Khan's dreams is to get a documentary made about his grandmother – a forum that will allow Moore to share her stories of extraordinary people, places and experiences with the entire world.

Moore is slated to be on hand at 10 a.m. today (Aug. 6) as "Imitation of Life" is screened at the Forsyth County Library on Fifth Street.

Playwright Micki Grant, Annie Hamlin Johnson and Producer/educator Dr. Glory Van Scott.



Photo by Layla Farmer

Actors Jay Jones and Thom Scott of the play "Black Angels Over Tuskegee."



Acclaimed costume designer Reggie Ray walks down Fourth Street.