

Notes



Mama Marvtastic shows a photo of her two boys.

A Mother's Love

Most people believe that Larry Leon Hamlin got his star-qualities from his mother - Annie Johnson Hamlin (or Mama Marvtastic). She has been an even more vibrant presence at the festival since her son died just over two years ago. Mama Marvtastic, in her dazzling outfits, warm smiles and the hugs she gives up freely, is trying to give the NBTF the pizzazz that her son brought to it so effortlessly.

During one of the few somber moments of this week, Mama Marvtastic talked about how the loss of not only Larry, but also her other son, Richard (who died several decades ago), has left a hole in heart.

"I stand here today as a proud mother of Mr. Marvtastic. I'm truly thankful God found favor to make me his mother," she said. "No one could know how close a bond of love Larry had for me but Jesus Christ."

Larry and Richard shared a close bond as well. According to Mama Marvtastic, Larry decided to leave Rhode Island, where he had studied and started a theater company, to return to North Carolina after his brother urged him to.



A Finazzle model works her way down the catwalk.

A Marvtastic Finazzle

Sharon Frazier is among the many artists that Larry Leon Hamlin helped to give wings so that they could fly in their chosen careers. Frazier, an accomplished singer and local educator, still can't talk too long about Hamlin, whom she calls her brother, without getting choked up.

Frazier is continuing Hamlin's legacy by maintaining her longtime involvement in the NBTF youth programs. One of her prize jewels this festival year is "Finazzle," a fashion, hair and design show for and featuring local teens. As for the title of the event? Finazzle is a combination of the words "finale" and "dazzle."

"Like Larry Leon Hamlin, I created a word too," said Frazier, referring Hamlin's often-used "Marvtastic." A free event, Finazzle will take place from 8 - 12 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 8 in the lower level of the Benton Convention Center.

WORD TO THE WISE

Maya Angelou keynotes educational component of NBTF

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

The organizers of the National Black Theatre Festival's International Colloquium didn't have to look very far to find the star power they needed to start the four-day seminar off right. Winston-Salem's own Maya Angelou - the celebrated poet and author and one of the festival's staunchest supporters since its inception 20 years ago - spoke at the colloquium's opening session Tuesday afternoon at the Embassy Suites Hotel.

The colloquium is a tradition of the Theatre Festival. Sessions this year centered around the theme, "The Voice of Women in Black Theatre." Angelou served as keynote speaker for day one of the series, titled "Voices."

"Make no mistake," said Howard University's Dr. Sandra Shannon, professor of African American Literature Criticism and Drama, in explaining the 2009 theme, "we do love our brothers, but women in black theater are also taking their place as leaders, creating their own theatrical space."

While the theater world has not historically been kind to African Americans of either gender, black women have had to struggle especially hard to make it, Shannon said, but the tides are turning now.

"The racial prejudices these women in black theater have fought against have pyramided over the last part of the 20th century," she remarked.

The colloquium is an important component of the Festival, in the estimation of Dr. Donald Reeves, chancellor of Winston-Salem State University, which has been tied to the colloquium since Dr. Olayope O. Oyelaran, a former WSSU professor, helped to launch it more than a decade ago. Oyelaran now teaches in Michigan but still coordinates the colloquium.

Reeves, who moved to the city just before the 2007 Festival, praised Founder and Visionary Larry Leon Hamlin for having the forethought to include the series in the biennial festivities.

"While the entertainment value of the Festival is unmatched, I believe that Larry Leon Hamlin wanted more," the



WSSU photos by Garrett Garris

Dr. Maya Angelou addresses a large crowd on Tuesday.

chancellor said. "I believe that Larry Leon Hamlin wanted people to think, to feel, to sense and to gain a greater understanding of the world and of themselves..."



Dr. Oyelaran

appearance, and more chairs were added to the assemblage in the room to accommodate the crowd. A barrage of excited audience members flooded the aisles when the poetess made her entrance, each

clamoring for a photograph of the Twin City's most famous resident.

Angelou opened with poetry and song, and wove the elements of her craft throughout her keynote speech. She touched on many subjects, regaling the audience with poetry and tales of her life experience, and offering her thoughts on the African-American experience in a modern world.

Words, Angelou said, can hurt.

"I don't think it behooves any man to call another man 'my dawg.' I think a dawg is a dog. The black man has worked so hard to be seen as a man; don't take it away," she declared. "...What we have to do is take our time to build each other up. There's a larger society, which will pull us down - don't help."

Knowing their proud history is vital for African Americans, Angelou said.

"I am courageous; I come from a courageous people," she commented, elaborating on the hardships African Americans have endured. "...Anytime you don't know you've lived it, you underestimate your own power, your own courage."

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"We just wanted to come see what it is all about," said Coker, who, at the time, said she and her friends had not yet run into any celebrities. That changed less than 10 minutes later when the ladies surrounded actor Bill Cobbs for a group picture.

For fans of stage, television, film and even music, the festival has become a place to star-gaze and soak in the talent of a wide and diverse group. But for the performers themselves, the event has become a place for them to hone their skills, network with colleagues and, yes, meet and greet their adoring public.

"I've always been a fan of this festival," said 2009 NBTF Celebrity Co-Chair Wendy Raquel Robinson, who is primarily known for her work on television and in films. "It's done so much for me, spiritually, mentally and definitely artistically."

Over the years, the NBTF has helped Robinson become an acclaimed stage performer as well. She has starred in a number of festival productions, including her offering this year, "Extremities."

Veteran actor Hal Williams says the NBTF is like a big family reunion. He doesn't get to see his colleagues that much when he's back at home in Los Angeles.

"Sometimes this is the only time I get to see people, every two years," he said.



Photo by Kevin Walker

Vivian Alston, Evelyn Coker, Barbara Junior, Gwendolyn Littlejohn and Ethel Washington, all of South Carolina, took a break from a Greensboro conference to check out the scene at the National Black Theatre Festival.

The significance of this year's festival is being felt by many. Not only is the NBTF celebrating its 20th anniversary, the N.C. Black Repertory Company, which made the theater festival possible, turned 30 this year. Both were founded by the late Larry Leon Hamlin, whose presence is still being strongly felt more than two years after he passed away.

"I'm missing Larry so much," said Ella Joyce, who has attended so many NBTFs that she's been dubbed the event's queen. "We have been left with the legacy of someone so great."

There were fears that the festival would die since Hamlin was no longer here to

nurture it. Some of those fears remain in the local community and beyond, but Hamlin's widow, Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, and a team of devout staffers that Hamlin trained for years, are carrying the torch. And many of those in the entertainment industry made it clear that they too will do all they can to help the festival thrive.

"We need the National Black Theatre Festival like never before," said Daniel Beaty, who became at star at the 2005 festival with his one-man smash, "Emergence-See!" "We need to remember that a king has walked among us ... Now the charge is ours to be more brilliant than we ever thought we

could..."

The early reviews from the public for this year's festival seemed good. Organizers were pleased to announce Tuesday that evening performances of "The Heiress" and "Mad as Miles," two NBTF Fringe shows (productions by college theaters), had sold out. Festival Co-Chair Ted Lange urged fans to buy their tickets quickly. The veteran actor/director/producer says the festival is like a holiday for theater fans.

"This is Christmas," he said. "Under the tree there are 17 theaters and you get to choose which one you want to open ... I love coming here in August for Christmas."



Photos by Kevin Walker

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin is escorted to the Gala by Larente Hamlin.



"In Living Color" actress T'Keyah Crystal Keymah chats and laughs with fans and friends.



Tony-winning singer Melba Moore.