

Lewis makes successful transition from stage to television

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

This week, Norm Lewis caused grown women to shriek and leap with excitement; one feverish young lady even followed him a few steps into a men's restroom at the Benton Convention Center. Such is the life of an actor with a role on one of television's most popular shows.

As Sen. Edison Davis on the ABC hit "Scandal," Lewis has been one of the points in television's most salacious love triangle.

"It's been great," he said of the role. "Luckily, I had the honor of being on the hottest show, and I had a chance to be with the hottest woman on television."

That woman, of course, is actress Kerry Washington, who recently garnered an Emmy nomination for playing Olivia Pope on the drama — the latest offering from "Grey's Anatomy" and "Private



A fan snaps a photo of Norm Lewis as he enters the Stevens Center Monday night.

Practice" creator Shonda Rhimes.

Lewis is no stranger to stardom. Solid performances over the past two decades in a string of Broadway shows have made Lewis — who is also a singer with an acclaimed baritone — a bonafide stage star and garnered him Tony and Drama Desk nominations. But international television exposure has increased the

Eatonville, Fla. native's name and face recognition tenfold.

"The recognition has been fantastic," said Lewis, whose first public performances were from the choir stand in his boyhood church. "People stop me in airports all the time and say, 'Hey, I know you; you're that guy from that show.' So it's been cool."

Lewis is enjoying the

National Black Theatre Festival for the very first time. He had long heard great things about the biennial gathering, but other commitments kept him away. Now that he's stepped onto what's been dubbed "Black Theatre Holy Ground," Lewis is hooked.

"I am loving it, and want to come back. I am going to tell everybody I know to come down here," he said.

Sen. Davis was MIA for much of the last season of "Scandal," but Lewis says fans shouldn't write the character off just yet.

"I think there might be some history with Sen. Edison Davis on that show," he said, alluding to the show's frequent use of flashback stories. "We are negotiating that right now. In Shondaland (also the name of Rhimes's production company), you never know what's going to happen."

Scholars' indelible mark left on black theatre

BY LAYLA GARMS
THE CHRONICLE

Black Theatre Network (BTN) founding members Drs. Carlton and Barbara Molette have spent a lifetime promoting, enriching and contributing to the world of black theater. The couple, who have been married for more than 53 years, were honored for their efforts with Living Legends Awards at the Opening Night Gala Monday evening.

When the Atlanta residents began teaching theater more than four decades ago, black theater was largely considered as an "exotic appendage" of white theater, and rarely recognized as an independent entity, said Carlton Molette.

"There was actually very little black theater being done, even in predominantly black or all black theater companies," recalled the Morehouse College alumnus. "The popular myth was there weren't any black plays."

Early in their careers, the Molettes, who are both retired, vowed to debunk the myths about black theater and bring the unique talents of African Americans in the industry to the forefront.

"Our first research grant as college professors was to compile a bibliography," Carlton Molette said. "We found over 1,200 plays that were available in somebody's library written by African Americans ... nobody had bothered to disprove this thing that professors were saying (about it not

existing)."

Higher education degree programs and support networks for African American thespians were also severely lacking in those days, the Molettes said. The BTN traces its own roots back to the American Theatre Association's Afro Asian Theatre Project, which began in 1965. Despite its name, the project did little to promote true black theater, Carlton Molette said.

"There was really no outlet, no organized outlet, that was available at that time," added Barbara Molette, an alumna of Florida A&M University. "... We turned the corner when a group of us read the constitution of the organization and discovered that we could have our own program."

The couple, who have written more than a dozen plays together, assembled a small contingent of fellow theater educators and others with a stake in the business to petition the association's leadership to allow them to create a new black theater program during the organization's annual conference in Washington, D.C. Though reluctant at first, the association's board of directors consented, and the African Theatre Project was born. When the ATA collapsed in 1986, the Molettes and others led the charge to create an autonomous organization, known as the Black Theatre Network. The Molettes, who released their second book, "Afrocentric Theatre," during the 2013 BTN conference, are the latest in a long line of BTN members who have been honored with NBTf awards for their leadership and contributions to the field.



Dr. Carlton Molette poses with his wife, Dr. Barbara Molette.

Photo by Layla Garms



Tommy Ford speaks as his friend and co-star Dorien Wilson stands beside him.

Staff Photos



Annie Hamlin Johnson, the mother of NBTf founder Larry Leon Hamlin, poses with "The Eve of Jackie" star Chester Gregory.



Actresses Kim Coles and Vanessa Bell Calloway pose together.



Broadway legend Chapman Roberts escorts Starletta DuPois to the Opening Night Gala.

DuPois

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"She was fighting her way back," DuPois said of Houston, who had battled substance abuse for years. "What a sweet, sweet spirit she was and is."

DuPois' return to Winston-Salem and the National Black Theatre Festival is extra special this time. After lending her support to the NBTf for more than a decade, she was honored at Monday's Opening Night Gala with a Living Legend Award for a career that stretches back to the 1970s.

"I am overwhelmed. I am full. I am exhilarated," said the actress — whose long list of credits also include films like "The Notebook," "Big Momma's House," "Wolf" and "Friday After Next."

The NBTf plaque comes just months after she was honored for her body of work with the Los Angeles Women's Theatre Festival's Eternity Award.

The Tony Award nominee can't exactly pin down her secret to career longevity, but she thinks her faith is a major factor.

"I could not do it without God," she said.

DuPois also believes that she has flourished by reaching back to help up-and-coming performers. She cherishes her role as mother hen, often accepting short term artist-in-residence positions at universities to help mold burgeoning talent. This week, she was also slated to lead a Festival workshop — "The Business of the Business" — to offer young performers keys success.

"Any of us could be the flavor of the month, but (the goal is to be here) 30 years later," she said.

DuPois also planned to address the pitfalls of stardom, a subject she thinks is especially relevant in the wake of the deaths of Houston and other celebrities.

"You have to be so careful about fame and fortune, because literally it can kill you," said DuPois, who is soon slated to shoot a project with Victoria Rowell, another 2013 NBTf celebrity guest.

Notes Celebrity readers

The National Black Theatre Festival is offering a slew of free events this week. Among them is the Mid-Morning Matinee, a program where celebrities read from their own books or those of their favorite writers.

The program is sponsored by the Mississippi-based literacy promotion foundation SonEdna in conjunction with the NBTf and the Forsyth County Public Library.

The series will welcome a number of notables who are expected to read at local library branches.

Yesterday, "Sesame Street" star Roscoe Orman and Pauletta Pearson Washington (Mrs. Denzel Washington) were slated to appear at the Malloy/Jordan East Winston Heritage Center, 1110 E. 7th St. Both of them are performing this week in the staged reading of "Power Play."

Today (Thursday, Aug. 1), the Malloy/Jordan East Winston Heritage Center will welcome Tony Award-winning actress Tonya Pinkins, one of this year's NBTf celebrity co-chairs, from 11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m.

Tomorrow, Friday, Aug. 2, from 11 a.m. — 12:30 p.m., "The Young and the Restless" star Victoria Rowell will be at the Central Library, 660 W 5th St.

All the FREE mid-morning sessions will be followed by a brief question and answer session and a book-signing.



Pearson Washington



Press Photo

Jones comes full-circle

NBTf Media Relations Director Brian McLaughlin introduced Bianca Laverne Jones as a "Festival baby" Tuesday.

The actress is among many second-generation NBTf performers and volunteers whose parents immersed them in the biennial festival from a very early age. Jones' father, Herman LeVern Jones, was Larry Leon Hamlin's righthand man long before Hamlin started the NBTf. In fact, it was Herman who created the business model for the NBTf.

Jones, who was raised in the Raleigh area and graduated from the high school program at UNC School of the Arts, was but a girl when she took in the very first NBTf in 1989.

"I was a little-bitty kid, and I saw Antonio (Fargas), Denzel Washington, Oprah," Jones said.

Jones is more than a mere observer and fan at this year's NBTf. The "festival baby" has come full-circle. She and show business veteran Stephanie Berry are staging "Iced-Out, Shackled and Chained: Still Looking for the North Star," an engaging performance piece that juxtaposes slave narratives with the situations that many blacks find themselves in today.

"Iced-Out" has been a labor of love for the two actresses. They self-funded the first stagings of it; positive word of mouth garnered the show a producer and prominent performance venues.

Jones, who studied acting at the SUNY Purchase Acting Conservatory and Yale School of Drama, has a slew of television and stage credits and will next be seen in Charles Fuller's "One Night," which will debut this fall at New York's Rattlestick Theater.

"Iced-Out" will be staged at Wake Forest University's Ring Theatre today (Aug. 1) and tomorrow at 8 p.m. and Saturday, Aug. 3 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Tickets are \$38 and available at the Benton Convention Center Box Office.

The Great Guillory

As an African American in theater, 2013 Larry Leon Hamlin Producer Award winner Ben Guillory says he has always known he had a proud tradition to uphold.

The co-founder of the Los Angeles-based Robey Theatre Company said being in the company of fellow

actors, directors and writers at this week's National Black Theatre festival gave him a renewed sense of purpose.

"Understanding our legacy and the shoulders of whom we stand on, I never really believed that I needed more inspiration than I already had, given our history," confessed Guillory, who has worked on stage and screen as an actor, director and producer.

"But being here tonight, in this room with all of you, I am doubly inspired to continue to work as a contributor... Thank you so much. I hope I can continue to do the work that we started."

Guillory co-founded the Robey, named for legend Paul Robeson, in 1994 with actor Danny Glover, whom he co-starred with in the film version of "The Color Purple." Fans of the film had a bit of déjà vu this week as they saw Guillory interacting with NBTf guest Margaret Avery, who earned an Oscar nomination for playing Shug Avery in the film. Guillory played her husband, Grady.

