

## Notes



Hal Williams accepts his award.

### Williams: Continue NBTF legacy

Some call it "Black Theatre Holy Ground;" for Hal Williams, the National Black Theatre Festival is a dream come true.

In accepting the Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award at the Opening Night Gala Monday, Williams implored those in the audience to continue to support the festival for generations to come.

"All these folks up here are the friends and family that I never had when I came to Los Angeles — they helped me achieve this dream," he declared, gesturing to the folks sharing the stage with him that night. "We've got to continue to have it so that it grows and never dies and inspires more and more people to pursue their dreams."

Williams, best known for sitcoms like "Sanford & Son" and "227" and films like "Private Benjamin" and "Guess Who," is starring in Joyce Sylvester's "Women in the Pit," which will be staged at Summit School today (Aug. 1) and tomorrow at 8 p.m. and at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 3.

### Aggies in the House

There is a lot of Aggie Pride in the air at the NBTF, as North Carolina A&T State University alumni are pretty much everywhere.

Jannie Jones says A&T was the perfect proving ground for her and other performers.

"We have had so much talent to come out of there," she said.

Jones is performing in the N.C. Black Repertory Company's production of "Crowns" at the NBTF, as is fellow Aggie Horace Vincent Rogers. Lorey Hayes, another Aggie, is starring in "Power Play," a show she wrote.

All three North Carolina natives have had tremendous careers. Jones got her big break in the 1980s when she joined Yolanda King (the late daughter of Civil Rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King) and Attallah Shabazz (the daughter of Malcolm X) on stage in "Stepping Into Tomorrow." The work came regularly after that. Jones, who now lives in New York, has performed on stages around the globe and on Broadway in productions of musicals like "The Full Monty" and "All Shook Up."

A&T still has a world-acclaimed theater program. Jones knows for a fact that the program is still bearing talented fruit. She jumped for joy while recently gearing up for a New York show after she learned that one of the young cast members was a recent A&T graduate.

"I was so thrilled. I said, 'Yeah, baby Aggies,'" Jones recalled with a grin.

### Emmett & Trayvon

The folks behind "The Ballad of Emmett Till" can't help but to draw parallels between Till's short life and that of Trayvon Martin, the Florida teen who was murdered more than a year ago by a white Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer. Till was brutally murdered by a white mob in 1955 Mississippi.

"Imagine Emmett going to the store to get some bubble gum, and Trayvon going to the store to get some Skittles," Eileen J. Morris, the artistic director of Houston's Ensemble Theatre, said Tuesday.

The Ensemble Theatre is staging its acclaimed "The Ballad of Emmett Till" at the NBTF. Playwright Ifa Bayeza calls the production a celebration of Till's life.

"I wanted to give Emmett Till his life back," said Bayeza, whose research included interviewing Till's friends and family members. "It is as American a story as it is an African American story."

During her research, she uncovered a letter that a 13-year-old Emmett penned to a girl he fancied. The pair had recently attended a carnival together, so to ensure that she would not forget him, Emmett enclosed two tickets to the following year's carnival in the letter.

"Of course," Bayeza said, "that (next) meeting never happened."

Emmett was killed a month after he turned 14. "The Ballad of Emmett Till" is playing at the Arts Council Theatre tomorrow and Saturday at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Tickets are \$38.



Eileen J. Morris

BY LAYLA GARMES  
THE CHRONICLE

National Black Theatre Festival Celebrity Co-Chair Tonya Pinkins is passionate about her craft, as is evidenced by the host of accolades — everything from Tony and Drama Desk awards to Audelcos — she has received over the course of her more than three-decade long career.

Off stage, Pinkins, who was hailed as "one of 10 women in America who will take your breath away" by Oprah Winfrey, is equally passionate about social justice.

During a NBTF press conference Monday, Pinkins alluded to the Trayvon Martin homicide, and the subsequent acquittal of Martin's killer, George Zimmerman.

On the homepage of her Web site, [www.tonyapinkins.com](http://www.tonyapinkins.com), she raged against the murders of Martin, and that of a lesser-known victim, 18 year-old Jett Gerald Higham, a teen who was gunned down in Richmond, Va. in what police believe was a robbery gone bad last month. The teen was headed out to the store to pick up a snack when the tragedy occurred, reports say.

"Going out for 'a drink and snack' has become synonymous with the murder of young Black men.



Photo by Kevin Walker

Outstanding Achievement in Scenic Design winner Patrice Andrew Davidson poses with actress Terria Joseph, who is among the all-star cast of "Women in the Pit," after the Opening Night Gala. Joseph is the mother of Grammy-winning superstar Alicia Keys.

## ACTRESS STEPS BEHIND THE CAMERA

BY LAYLA GARMES  
THE CHRONICLE

The Fair Hope Benevolent Society and the Foot Wash Festival of Faundale, Ala. share a common history and location, but that's where the similarities end.

While the Society, formed in the late 1880's as a means of providing care and proper burials for newly-freed slaves, was created to uplift and empower the black community, its unwitting successor, the Foot Wash, represents everything that is hurting the black community today.

What began as an annual gathering for Society members and their families evolved into Foot Wash, an annual celebration rampant with drugs and prostitution that regularly draws upwards of 100,000 attendees. Society members still worship at the site once a month, including during the Foot Wash.

Emmy Award winning actress S. Epatha Merkerson explores the dichotomy between the two entities in her breakout documentary: "The Contradictions of Fair Hope."

"It traces the history and tries to explain how we can go from a place of nobility to a place of debauchery," explained Merkerson, who is best known for her roles on NBC's "Law & Order" and HBO's "Lackawanna Blues." "...We called the film 'Contradictions' because we just kept running into them all the time."

The film was screened Tuesday at the National Black Theatre Festival Film Fest at the Central Library. A pimp who goes on to graduate from college with honors and a pious Society member who happily rents her land out to pimps and drug dealers for a favorable sum are among the host of colorful characters depicted in the film, one of the underlying messages of which is to illustrate the importance of knowing



Photo by Layla Garmes

S. Epatha Merkerson speaks at the NBTF Film Fest.

one's own history.

"We have this extraordinarily rich history, and we need to find a way to keep that history alive," Merkerson told the packed house of more than 150 attendees in the library auditorium. "...Our history is so important and as long as we learn about where we're from, I think we'll have a better chance of figuring out where we're going."

The film is Merkerson's first foray into filmmaking. She told attendees that she already has two other projects in the works.

"It's been a real learning experience," confessed the veteran actress. "Being in front of the camera is not the same as being behind it."

"Contradictions," which has garnered a host of awards and accolades on the black film festival circuit, also received rave reviews in Winston-Salem.

"I just want to congratulate you

# Broadway legend is a fighter for justice



Staff Photo

Tonya Pinkins speaks at Monday's news conference.

Trayvon Martin and on July 2, 2013 Jett Gerald Higham was gunned down for \$4 and an iPhone," Pinkins wrote on her webpage after learning of Higham's death. "They didn't even take the loot."

Pinkins said Monday that the Zimmerman verdict is indicative of a much larger issue: society's treatment of black men.

"Trayvon is a symbol of millions of other blacks who this is happening to on a daily basis," she declared. "So I hope this is a wake up call for us."

Pinkins' interest in justice prompted her to attend law school, before putting her command for oration to work as a performer.

"My professors told me, 'You're going to be a

great lawyer because you're a great actress,'" she related. "I realized then that the truth had no place in the law."

A strong advocate for women and children and an outspoken opponent of domestic violence, the former "All My Children" star is no stranger to the courtroom. Though she set her pursuit of a juris doctorate aside, Pinkins, a mother of four, says she likes to go it alone when it comes to courtroom battles. As a self-represented litigant, she has won many victories in court — all aimed at uplifting the downtrodden and righting wrongs.

She is currently embroiled in a lawsuit against the booster club at her daughter's school,

Centennial High School, which Pinkins says tried to use false claims to oust her as president. Pinkins also represented herself in a highly-publicized child custody suit in the 1990s.

"I'm always representing myself. I think I've probably had as much trial experience as most licensed, practicing lawyers," she said. "...I feel very strongly about the right to self representation that was put in our Constitution. I think the right of self representation was put into the Constitution for a reason, and I'm very active on that."

Pinkins, a critically acclaimed Broadway superstar, is appearing this week in her one-woman musical show, "Tonya Pinkins Unplugged." Her cabaret-style show is a hit in the Big Apple, but Pinkins said she has devised a special set for the NBTF, which she says will mark the first time she has done her show before a predominantly black audience.

"Tonya Pinkins Unplugged" will be staged in the Gaines Ballroom of the Embassy Suites from Wednesday, July 31 through Saturday, Aug. 3 at 10:30 p.m. Tickets are \$40 and can be purchased at the Benton Convention Center Box Office or at the venue before non-sold-out shows.



Staff Photo

Legends Sandra McClain and Lou Beatty Jr. walk into the banquet hall at the Benton Convention Center for the Opening Night Gala. McClain, whose storied stage and screen career spans more than 35 years, is starring in "Barbara Jordan: A Rendezvous with Destiny," while Beatty, known for films like "Fight Club" and "Fast & Furious" is starring in Ted Lange's historical drama, "Lady Patriot."

on a powerful, powerful piece," one audience member declared after seeing the film. "You spanned the whole panorama of the issues we face."

Merkerson hopes to release the film on DVD during Black History Month 2014.

This is Merkerson's first time at the NBTF. Organizers had long invited the talented actress, but her "Law & Order" shooting schedule prohibited her from attending in the past. The NBTF presented her with its Special Recognition Award during Monday's Opening Night Gala.

The NBTF Film Fest will continue at Central Library today (Thursday, Aug. 1) with the showing of "Wolf Call" with Mike Wiley and Rob Underhill at 10 a.m., "Legitimate Child" with Kelly McKenna at 10:40 a.m., "Honey Boy" with Terri Burnett at 11:10 a.m., "Torn" with Terra Hodge at 11:50 a.m., "The Mattress Hustle" with Susan Watson Turner at 12:20 p.m., "The One Who Builds" at 1 p.m. and "SULE and the Case of the Tiny Sparks" at 1:50 p.m. On Friday, Aug. 2, The MC Benton Convention Center will host showings of "Hello" with Wesley Davis at 10 a.m., "Honey Boy" at 10:35 a.m., "Chihuahua Rampage" at 11:20 a.m., and "Stand Down Soldier" with Jeryl Prescott Sales at 11:45 a.m. The Film Fest will culminate on Saturday, Aug. 3 at Central Library with showings of "The Journey of Seven Guitars" with Susan Watson Turner at 10 a.m., "Corruption" with Rukiya Shanteel at 10:35 a.m., "Faces of Courage: The Impetus to Desegregate" with Matthew Williams at 11:05 a.m., "Necklace of Thorns" with Dionna Daniels at 11:40 a.m., "Twin Poets: Why I Write" at 12:25 p.m. and "SULE and the Case of the Tiny Sparks" at 1:55 p.m.