



Photo courtesy of the N.C. Black Paperboy Co.

The Founder: Larry Leon Hamlin

The Founder

It all started with a dream – one that Larry Leon Hamlin, through dogged determination, pushed into a glorious reality.

The National Black Theatre Festival has been held up by the *New York Times* as “one of the most historic and culturally significant events” in the history of American theater. The road to such acclaim was paved by Hamlin, a visionary ahead of his time whose contributions are vast and wide-reaching.

The first six-day biennial festival was held in the summer of 1989. Dr. Maya Angelou served as the celebrity chairwoman. Hamlin went to Angelou, who had moved to Winston-Salem more than a decade earlier to teach at Wake Forest University, with his idea of organizing a showcase for Black theater that would bring together theater companies and productions from the across the nation and globe. Hamlin’s enthusiasm and vision won Angelou over. She helped him raise about half-a-million dollars to stage the event and recruited some of her high-profile friends, Oprah Winfrey among them, to make appearances during the festival.

The first NBTF exceeded expectations: more than 10,000 people attended; the nearly 20 theater companies invited to present played to sold-out crowds; and loads of positive press was garnered. The success did not surprise Hamlin. Black theater was in his blood; he knew its power to entertain, enrich and enlighten all lives – black, white, brown, etc.

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The late Larry Leon Hamlin started the NBTF in 1989.



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