

## The Glory of Gospel

*The cast makes a joyful noise*



*Mabel Robinson*

### The Glory of Gospel

UNC School of the Arts Stevens Center

Thurs, Aug. 6	8 p.m.
Fri, Aug. 7	8 p.m.
Sat, Aug. 8	3 p.m.
Sat, Aug. 8	8 p.m.

**\$41**

World-class theater is available in our own backyard year-round. The North Carolina Black Repertory Company will drive home that fact during the NBTF and show it is no slouch when it comes to staging high-quality shows.

"The Glory of Gospel" is one of the Black Rep's contributions this year. It is a throwback, a classic from the Company's expansive oeuvre. Local audiences first fell under its spell in 1996; national crowds did the same in 1997, when it made its NBTF debut. But the origins of the show stretch back even further than that. Black Rep Artistic Director Mabel Robinson was commissioned by a Dutch company to write, direct and choreograph the show in the early 1990s. It was a hit in places like Germany, Holland and Belgium long before American audiences were hooked.

"The Glory of Gospel" is an uplifting history lesson, telling the story of a people who broke the chains of slavery and rose from the degradation of Jim Crow with the help of a powerful musical genre. Along with enlightening narration, about 50 songs are packed into the two-act musical.

In May, when the production was staged a handful of times to receptive local audiences, Robinson told *The Chronicle* the first act is a journey through the Middle Passage, the auction block, plantation life and, finally, the Emancipation Proclamation. Songs, many of them well-known classics, are used to drive home the emotions and tumult of each period. A cast of talented performers use their powerful pipes to emanate pain, longing and a desire for better tomorrows.

"A lot of the spirituals became message songs and work songs so that we found a way of communicating and stayed connected to the Motherland," Robinson said, noting how vital gospel has been to African-Americans. "That's been our savior in our culture throughout our work, play, services, funerals, escapes and events like that."

The second act pays homage to pioneers who pushed gospel into the forefront in the 20th century, people like Thomas A. Dorsey, a composer whose songs include "Take My Hand Precious Lord" and "Peace in the Valley;" and Lucie E. Campbell, the woman behind standards like "King's Highway" and "Touch Me Lord Jesus."

Hits by the likes of Robert Bradley, The Spirit of Memphis, The Angelic Gospel Singers, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland, the Jubilee Singers and many more are given new life by the cast of 24, which includes members of the Black Rep's Teen Theatre Ensemble. Robinson believes gospel's reach is wide and offers something for everyone – young, old, black, white.

"Gospel just continues to grow, even with the young people rapping the gospel message. It's something that has been a part of our lives, and I think it's something that will continue to be a part of our lives," she said.

The gospel musical has become Robinson's signature. She has helmed acclaimed stagings of "Crowns" and her original show "Mahalia, Queen of Gospel" at past festivals, and her foot-stomping, soul-enriching "Black Nativity" is an annual Black Rep tradition. Robinson, who is also a noted choreographer and dancer, has earned both Emmy and Tony nominations during her long, illustrious career. Her longtime partner-in-excellence, Tony Gillion, serves as the show's music director. ■

### Living Legend Award

## Robert Hooks

Robert Hooks first stood under the spotlight when he was in elementary school and starring in his very first play, "The Pirates of Penzance." By the time he was in his early 20s, he was traveling the nation in a tour of "A Raisin in the Sun." "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright" was his Broadway debut; he also earned great acclaim for playing the lead in Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman." Hooks co-founded the illustrious Negro Ensemble Company in 1967. The New York-based theater company has been a training ground for a long list of stars and has produced some of black theater's most landmark works.

Hooks has also had a long and notable career on the big and small screens. His television credits include "A Different World," "Sister, Sister," "Trapper John, M.D.," "WKRP in Cincinnati," "Diagnosis Murder" and "Seinfeld." His film credits include "Airport '77," "Posse," "Passenger 57" and "Fled." (The latter two were directed by his son, Kevin Hooks.)