

NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE FESTIVAL

Marvtastic! reflections

Longtime festival-goer speaks about NBTF

BY FELECIA PIGGOTT-LONG, PH.D.
FOR THE CHRONICLE

"Put on your Purple and Black!
The Festival is back!
Larry Leon's Black Rep got it goin' on.
A family reunion, lovin' to the bone.
This is holy ground."

I penned this cheer in 1991 as I prepared to pump up the crowd of thousands of our children and their parents, grandparents, camp leaders, and guardians who would work with the Youth Celebrity Project coordinated by Cleopatra Solomon and Cynthia Mack for the second festival. They are "the Watoto," the next generation, in this village.

The message still resonates in my purple heart. I thought of this little ditty last night [Monday, Aug. 3] as I entered the Benton Convention Center for the 2015 Gala for the 14th National Black Theatre Festival.

I thought of the great cloud of witnesses, the ancestors, who would meet us at this great reunion of spirit, right here in Winston-Salem on "Black Theatre Holy Ground." When I passed by the purple and black soldiers who provide security for the events of this week, I had to capture the intensity of their professionalism – volunteers on watch for the family. I walked through welcoming purple and black doors, marked with the traditional NBTF shield or coat of arms done by our cousin LaVon Van Williams Jr. The greeting on the doors said, "National Black Theatre Festival 2015," which means, "Ya'll come on in the house!" Once I was inside, I met the purple and black escorts, connected with the box office volunteers led by Natalie Summers and Jerome McCoy, and concessions workers led by Dr. David Peay and Harweda Coe.

Yes, it is a family reunion! And love is the main ingredient. As a photographer, I found it delightfully challenging to compete with our cousins on the sidelines who were also snapping away and connecting with one celebrity cuz after another. Young Kya Redd, 8, refused to let a mere rope separate her from celeb/uncle Dorian Wilson of "The Parkers" as he strolled down the royal purple carpet. She ran into his arms, and he held tight, showing her off to the family. We all caught that Kodak



Black Rep history author Felecia Piggott-Long congratulates Warren Dell Leggett of Winston-Salem for his humanitarian award at the opening gala of the 2015 National Black Theatre Festival.

moment. The rhythm of the Carver High School band created a dynamic backdrop for the evening.

Before dinner, so many reconnecting hugs and peals of laughter filled the room. It was hard to get a word in edgewise. I was able to connect with two kings – Woodie King, Jr., founder and producing director of New Federal Theatre, and Bill Cobbs, winner of the Sidney Portier Lifelong Achievement Award. I know that in 1988, Larry Leon shared his dream of establishing a "national forum where artists of color from all over the world could convene in the spirit of collaborative, creative excellence" with King, and in 1989, the National Black Theatre Festival was born. I was pleased to discover that Robert Hooks, winner of the Living Legend Award, introduced Woodie King to New York. Since I have seen King Cobbs at so many festivals, he has definitely become family to all of us. By connecting with Terrence Spivey, Artistic Director of Karamu House's 100-year tradition, I learned of their nurturing African-American actors such as Bill Cobbs, Vanessa Bell Calloway, Richard Brooks,

just to name a few.

During a family reunion, we always give honor to family members who have made accomplishments during the time we have been apart. The awards gala serves this purpose. I was thrilled to be able to personally congratulate local awardees Rachel P. Jackson and Warren Dell Leggett, two humble contributors whose exceptional service to the North Carolina Black Repertory Company is undeniable. Jackson won the Special Recognition Award, and Leggett won the Theatre Arts and Humanitarian Award.

Smiling down

I am sure that Larry Leon Hamlin smiled down upon this great reunion. Nate Jacobs gave him honor for taking him under his wings and for helping to get him and Aunt Rudele "off the bus stop." Jacobs earned the Larry Leon Hamlin Producer Award. I was also pleased to connect with the founder and CEO of Project VOICE Erich McMillan-McCall, because I saw the wonderful production of Sammart Williams' play "Home" at the Arts Council Theatre. I was pleased to meet

Ralph Womble of the Winston-Salem's Millennium Fund, who received the Marvtastic Philanthropy Award.

The production of Black Stars of the Great White Way made us all proud to be family. I was elated to see the song "Glory" added to such a fine set. Thank you for being the griots who brought the story of the 100-year history of African-Americans on Broadway to the National Black Theatre Festival 2015. The sponsors keep making this inheritance available to generations. We continue to embrace the theatrical productions, celebrity receptions, International Colloquiums, Midnight Poetry Jams, the NBTF Film Fest, National Youth Talent Showcase, The National Black Theatre Hall of Fame and Museum, The Reader's Theatre, workshops and seminars, Teentastic and the Youth Celebrity Project. Let us continue to love one another on "Black Theatre Holy Ground."

Felecia Piggott-Long is author of the book "The North Carolina Black Repertory Company: 25 Marvtastic Years."

National Black Theater Festival

W-S at Night

AUGUST 6-8, 9 P.M. to MIDNIGHT DOWNTOWN WINSTON-SALEM

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