

# 227 Actress Helen Martin Makes New Address In Winston-Salem

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At 5-feet tall, she is diminutive in size. But actress Helen Martin's personality is plenty big enough to fill the room in her newly settled house in Winston-Salem.

Best known as Pearl on 227 and Weeping Weeping Wanda, the funeral lady, on *Good Times*, Martin has a wide following from her appearances on many syndicated television shows as well as in 12 feature films such as *House Party II*, *Doc Hollywood* and *Rage in Harlem*. Now she's taking her powerhouse talent to the Piedmont.

Martin first came to town for the 1991 National Black Theatre Festival, during which she was honored for her long and successful career in theater.

"All of us are riding on the backs of actresses, such as Helen

exhibit of Martin's career will be on display at the Deck the Walls store at Hanes Mall.

The veteran actress is one of a very few black thespians who can boast of a 50-year career in theater. She remembers long days and weeks between acting jobs, and the many sacrifices made, such as the decisions to forego having children.

"We cool," Martin says, snapping her fingers and high-stepping as lively as any teen-ager.

Then, she leans her head back and falls into a melodramatic imitation of her favorite actress: Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel*.

"I want to be alone."

Martin says she approached Garbo on a set one day and whispered, "I am a fan of yours." Garbo simply turned and smiled.

Martin toured seven countries on the road with *Amen Corner*,



"When I was about 5 or 6 years old, I went into the attic and dragged out an old dress and a hat with plumes," she recalls. "I stood in front of the mirror and acted like I was fainting, then like I was shot. And I got some talcum powder and put it on my face. I loved it. I always figured I was made for theater."

One of her favorite roles was as the African Queen in *The Blacks*, a play by French playwright Jean Genet. They performed it in the 1940s in Venice at the West Berlin Drama Festival. Maya Angelou played the white queen, and other actors included James Earle Jones, Lou Gossett Jr. and Cicily Tyson.

Bill Raines, a Wake Forest University Spanish professor, is writing a biography on Martin.

Few black actors earn a full-time income from their craft. Martin is no exception. She recalls serving food at catered parties for whites, working as domestic help for New York Jewish families, and cutting cloth in New York's Garment District.

"I took night jobs so I could make the rounds in the daytime, going to agents looking for work," she says. She got 50 cents an hour.

"I'm not a follower. I'm an independent," she says.

On Nov. 18, Martin will conduct a lecture and workshop with UNCG's drama department, and says she looks forward to mixing with the community.

She raises her arms to dramatize a line from "The Blacks" and says: "Negroes of the whole world, come unto me."

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"I always figured I was made for theater."



Helen Martin is best remembered for her role as the funeral lady in *Good Times*, and as Pearl in 227.



"It's the most heartbreaking and the cruelest business you've ever been into."

"She has struggled against stereotypical roles and has often been plugged into them," says Raines. "But she is so resilient, and the proof of that is the very fact that she had three feature films released last year, having done her first feature film in 1955."

Raines is interested in blacks in the theater and says he considers Martin primarily as a stage actress.

Even so, Martin received the Oscar Micheaux Award last February from the Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame in Oakland, Calif.

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— Bill Raines  
Wake Forest University Professor

Micheaux was a black filmmaker who is best known for his projects during the silent era.

Martin," Hamlin says. "She has made profound contributions to theater and black theater and the entertainment industry as a whole. We are very fortunate to have her make Winston-Salem her home. She'll be a valuable asset," he says.

Martin moved to Winston-Salem in May, although she maintains a Los Angeles apartment. In comparison to Los Angeles, she found Winston-Salem "clean and historical."

Martin's nephew, Calvin Oliver, recently established Toyt Entertainment, a theater production company. He and his associate, Elizabeth Ransby, are gearing to work with the N.C. Black Repertory Company to produce Richard Wright's play, *Amen Corner* at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro next year.

They also hope to arrange for Martin to work with schools and local organizations to offer theatrical workshops throughout the com-

including Italy, Holland, Rome and Jerusalem.

Martin made her Broadway debut in 1941 in *Native Son*, directed by Orson Wells. She worked with Eliza Kazan the following year in *Deep Are the Roots*.

She admits to being "a true Southern girl. I love cornbread and collards."

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