

# Greensboro's Triad Stage makes list of nation's best

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**GREENSBORO** - Triad Stage has been recognized as one of "America's 50 Best Regional Theatres" by the Drama League, a New York City-based organization dedicated to educating America about the joys of professional theater and expanding audiences for the art form.

Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, New York's

Second Stage, Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum and Minnesota's Guthrie Theatre, along with 45 other outstanding nationally known theaters received this recognition as well. The group said that Triad Stage made the cut because of its artistic vision, and because it brings excellence in design, production and direction to its patrons. The Drama League list of 50 best regional companies is chosen by a panel of

theater professionals and audience members.

"It's unusual for a theater in a town the size of Greensboro to show up on this list," says Gabriel Shanks, marketing director for the Drama League. "It was a pretty big deal for us to name Triad Stage one of the nation's 50 best theaters. We think it's a well-deserved honor."

Triad Stage faced some stiff competition in the South-

eastern region, vying with theaters such as Charlotte Repertory Theatre and Nashville's Tennessee Repertory Theatre, and the area's only other honoree, PlayMakers Repertory Company of Chapel Hill.

"We couldn't be more thrilled," said artistic director Preston Lane. "The Drama League is recognized nationally for its excellence in theater development, and its annual awards to New York theater have a longer history than even the Tonys. To be selected for this recognition is a great vote of confidence. After a whirlwind grand opening, Triad Stage has not even completed its first full season and

we're already getting national recognition. An honor like this not only puts us on the map for arts and theater lovers all over America, but proves that the Triad - contrary to the naysayers at Forbes Magazine - is culturally alive and well and is a great place to call home."

Triad Stage Co-Founders Preston Lane and Richard Whittington, both graduates of the Yale School of Drama, came to Greensboro five years ago with the vision to create a professional theater company. After raising \$5.1 million and renovating a long-abandoned Montgomery Ward department store into an intimate 300-seat

thrust theater and support space, the new regional theater began to tell stories on stage.

In its first 14 months of operation, Triad Stage has already produced 10 main-stage productions and performed to more than 45,000 ticket holders. The theater is currently featuring a critically and popularly hailed production of "August Snow" by N.C. playwright/novelist Reynolds Price. "August Snow" will run through March 16.

For more information or to purchase tickets, call the Triad Stage box office at (336) 272-0160.



Queen Latifah on the runway for Lane Bryant.

## Queen

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those two facts.

"That's a crushing thing to tell a kid. To introduce your child to the fact that you live in a world of racism is tough. So things like musicals were places you could escape to."

Latifah, who played the opportunistic prison matron in the movie "Chicago," was the lone black acting nominee for this year's Oscars, after three black actors earned nominations last year. Halle Berry and Denzel Washington both won, the first time black actors swept the top acting prizes.

Some viewed Berry and Washington's wins as a sign that Hollywood finally was making a fair share of choice roles available to blacks. Others saw it as an aberration.

Latifah simply likes to think the best man and woman won.

"I looked at it as they both deserved those awards," she said. "But it's not the kind of thing I held on to, like, OK, we've made it. We've arrived. ..."

"I think as long as there's racism in America, there's always going to be racism, period. As long as there's classism, then there's going to be classism across the board, which can translate into racism. I don't really look at it as everything has changed. I appreciate the nomination. I'm proud of what we did with 'Chicago.' So I'm just going to go and enjoy the moment, you know?"

Her ascent to Oscar-caliber performer began with church choir gigs and school plays as a child. Her wide musical influences included jazz, rock, soul,

gospel, doowop and reggae, along with movie musicals.

She made her first mark as a rapper recording singles in her late teens, when she added "Queen" to her stage name. She was hunting for a tag to set her apart from the many rappers adopting the initials "M.C."

"Everybody was M.C. this, M.C. that, and I didn't want to be known as M.C. Latifah," she said. "I had kind of been kicking around 'Queen' because I thought all women should carry themselves as queens, and if they felt that way about themselves, they wouldn't go for half the things they do. They wouldn't allow people to just treat them any kind of way. And they would feel proud, respected. So I was like, yeah, queen. That sounds good."

"My mother was like, 'Queen? Who the queen? You're 17. I'm the damn queen.' But she trusted me, and I stuck with it, and it worked."

With her Afrocentric garb and regal presence, Latifah launched her career with the album "All Hail the Queen" in 1989. Three more records followed in the '90s, and the single "U.N.I.T.Y." earned her a Grammy for best solo rap performance.

Emil Wilbekin of Vibe magazine calls her "one of the foremothers of female rap."

"A lot of her music was very motivational, very grass-roots, and she really took on this whole role as ... being this sort of Nubian queen, and being very strong," said Wilbekin. "I think she kind of represented real women, instead of the music-industry, cookie-cutter version of the female rapper."

She made her movie debut in Spike Lee's "Jungle Fever" in 1992, starred in the sitcom "Liv-

ing Single" and was host of a syndicated TV talk show. Other movie credits include "Set It Off," in which she played a bank robber, and "Living Out Loud."

"I think 'Set It Off' really showed everyone a different side of Queen Latifah, because she played a bad woman," Wilbekin said. "That was a real turning point for her because everyone thought of her as the big sister or the good friend."

Latifah also launched her own record label - among her first acts was the Grammy-winning rap group Naughty By Nature - and management company, Flavor Unit Entertainment. And she wrote the inspirational memoir "Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman."

In between, there were a couple of scrapes with the law. In 1996, she pleaded guilty to carrying a loaded firearm in a vehicle and driving without a valid license. In a separate case, she pleaded no contest in January to reckless driving. In both incidents, she was ordered to pay a fine and sentenced to probation.

In "Bringing Down the House," Latifah plays a brassy prison escapee who upends the life of an uptight attorney (Martin), whom she enlists to clear her name. She came onto the project early, helping to shape the script.

Her Oscar nomination caps a 10-year slow build to gain clout as an actress.

"I guess I've been putting in my work, and people have kind of been waking up slowly," she said. "Your little hand, you've got to keep knocking on them, knocking, knocking, till they finally say, 'What the hell is that?' and take a look."

## Activists

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"If there's any censorship, it's being done by the radio stations. They have a First Amendment right to play what they want. While we'd prefer they not play any of this offensive music, they could balance things with more music with lyrics that elevate our women and children."

Readers may remember Butts' campaign several years ago to destroy records with negative messages by steamrolling them in the street.

Brenda Watts, an assistant principal and a member of the New York Association of Black Educators, said the children she encountered were imitating and absorbing all the negative information from the current selections on local radio stations.

"They are not receiving any nurturing music," she said. "Many of our children can't write a decent sentence. What we need is music that is more liberating."

For Law and his colleagues, liberating music would be consistent with the ideas promoted by Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Ojays, Curtis Mayfield and others in the past. Prof. Leonard Jeffries, a political and social sci-

entist, and Minister Kevin Muhammad of the Nation of Islam were among those in attendance and in support of the drive to eliminate filthy music.

"Our contention is not that progressive music is not being produced," Law said. "It is, but the stations are refusing to play it."

He said the stations rarely play such current artists as Common, Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, KRS1 and Nas.

"I think it's a deliberate policy on part of the program directors at these stations to suppress conscious rap. Even some of the older performers with established reputations can't get any airplay."

Al Goodman, of the group Ray Goodman & Brown, said: "We get some play of our older recordings on various Quiet Storm stations, but no one plays our current release. They say we're too old. Are the Rolling Stones and Cher too old?"

Almitra, an independent music producer, said: "An example of music with conscious lyrics is 'The Colored Section' by Donnie. They can't say that conscious rap music is not being produced, because it is. They are just not playing it."

Some listeners have their

doubts about the radio campaign.

"I don't know how effective it's going to be to ask people to turn off their radios, and even if they do, there's no way to measure the impact of this demand," said Aisha Salaam, attending the morning conference with her mother, Sharonne Salaam. "There are other stations that play more conscious music, more conscious rap, and maybe that's an option."

According to Law and Butts, this is just the first phase of their campaign to halt the spread and proliferation of negative music.

"And already we're getting feedback from some of the stations that have included more conscious music at their stations," Law said. "We hope to make this a nationwide initiative."

Butts added, "The main thing is to get the stations to pay attention to our message. But, more than anything, we want the people to get the message."

Members of the National Leadership Alliance are hoping that advertisers will also get the message and not support stations with an unbalanced play list.

Law concluded, "If not, we may have to selectively choose a few of them to boycott."

## 'Soul Food'

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her to keep quiet about what happened. Bird (Malinda Williams) and Lem (Darrin Dewitt Henson) contemplated moving out of the Joseph house to end bickering between the sisters, and Ahmad (Meeks) continued to learn

invaluable lessons from his strong-willed aunts and family experiences.

In the fourth season, Damon is arrested for drinking and driving, sparking Teri's concern that he has a problem. Lem finds out that Bird's old boyfriend is stalking her, and Ahmad catches his parents "in the act" much to every-

one's embarrassment.

The series is executive produced by Tracey Edmonds, Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, George Tillman Jr. and Robert Teitel. Felicia D. Henderson developed the series for television and also serves as executive producer for the fourth season.

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