

James Reynolds spends days of his life playing cop on daytime drama

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

James Reynolds is not a police officer but he has played one on television for the last 22 years. The "Days of Our Lives" soap star, who is best known as commander Abe Carver, has appeared on camera more than any other African-American actor in daytime television. It's a feat he never thought would materialize since the Kansas native wasn't planning on making a living as a soap actor.

"I was excited to get the job, but I thought maybe a year or so. No longer," said Reynolds.

He credits fans for his character's longevity on the series and his success on daytime television. Or else, he says, Abe Carver may never have been resurrected. The police commander was killed off and brought back to life on the show two years ago.

"I hope a lot of it is because the audience responds to the character. They really like and appreciate this character," Reynolds said. "I certainly hope I give everything I can to Abe."

Reynolds spent nine years on "Days" before joining the cast of "Generations," which earned him an Emmy nod for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series. In 1991,



Actor James Reynolds is one of daytime's most recognizable faces. Photo by Kevin Walker

his character returned to the fictional town of Salem on "Days" where he received another Emmy nomination and an NAACP Image Award nomination for Best Actor in a Daytime Drama. Reynolds has been awarded the Heroes and Legends TV/Film Award, and he was voted Outstanding Supporting Actor by the Soap Chat Viewers Choice Awards.

This year marks Reynolds' first

visit to the National Black Theatre Festival, where he participated in a panel discussion yesterday on "African-American Performers in Daytime Television." Reynolds conducts soap-related seminars regularly where he says he's quizzed on the life of a daytime TV actor.

"The thing I'm amazed at is that it's (the NBTF) so large. It's huge," said Reynolds.

While TV viewers may know

him from the small screen, Reynolds is no stranger to the theatrical stage. He caught the acting bug while studying journalism at Washburn University, where he performed in countless dramatic productions and musicals. Reynolds also spent time with a repertory company in Colorado Springs, Colo., before his television career kicked off. He has guest starred on "Seinfeld," "227" and "Highway to Heaven," among other shows.

"I started in theater. I think for actors it begins in theater," Reynolds said. "I think something in them says they aren't really actors until they step on the stage.... Having grown up in theater, it's a part of who I am, and it's a part of the process and a strong part of what I feel about the craft."

His theater ties remain strong to this day. He and his wife, Lissa Layng, operate the Fremont Centre Theatre in South Pasadena, Calif. There he recently directed his son, Jed, in "National Pastime" a play about baseball legend Jackie Robinson that received high critical acclaim.

Despite his full schedule, Reynolds still finds time to coach a women's basketball team and run a film and TV production company, Free State Productions, outside of Los Angeles.

NOTES

Acting bug bites Nelson

Todd Nelson has joined a growing list of names — People Who Have Been Influenced to Follow their Dreams by Mr. Marvastic himself, Larry Leon Hamlin. Nelson, who was raised here in the city, has recently moved to New York to pursue his dream of being an actor full time.

He has already found some success, with parts on "All My Children" and "America's Most Wanted" (the show uses actors to re-create crimes).

Nelson clearly remembers the day he met Hamlin. Nelson, who had just become a teenager, was taking a class at the Arts Council Theatre when he wandered to the ground floor of the building and the office of Hamlin's N.C. Black Repertory Company. He told Hamlin he wanted to be an actor; Hamlin gave Nelson his first job.

"He told me to go learn the Langston Hughes poem 'Harlem,'" Nelson recalled. After that, Nelson, who is now 21, became one of the many young people that Hamlin takes under his wings. Nelson has come home for the NBTF. It is a place that has brought him good luck in the past. During the 1999 festival, a casting director spotted Nelson and hired him for a part in the television movie "Shake, Rattle and Role."

Hamlin is giving Nelson a chance to shine at this festival as well. He will co-host the Youth Talent Show today and tomorrow along with actress RaéVen Larymore Kelly. He is also working with the festival's Youth/Celebrity Project.



Todd Nelson and his son.

BRINGING THE DOWN LOW UP HIGH

Playwright hopes work will inspire faith community to address sexuality, AIDS

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

If there were an award for the most clever marketing ploy to publicize a play, Yvette Heyliger would win it — hands down.

It is difficult for even the most uninterested 2005 National Black Theatre Festival-goer not to pay attention to the postcard-size fliers with the



bright yellow condoms attached to them. Heyliger has been passing them out this week to promote a reading of her play "What Would Jesus Do?" scheduled to take place today (Aug. 4) at 11 a.m. at Union Baptist Church (1200 Trade Street).

The play is mainly set in the black church. It deals with a God-fearing African-American family that is rocked to its core when the wife/mother learns that she may have been

exposed to HIV by her bisexual husband.

Heyliger knows that the subject matter is touchy since sexuality and especially homosexuality are taboo topics in many black families and churches. She says she is willing to take some heat if it means that the faith community, especially, will be more adamant in addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS.

"I'm sure that I do step on some toes," she said Monday. "I don't really care about that. I care about prevention."

Heyliger, who had a recurring role as Aunt Sarah on "The Cosby Show," began developing "What Would Jesus Do?" a couple years ago. She had gone to the late Tunde Samuel, the then-head of theater arts at Harlem's National Black Theatre, to ask his advice about what subject matter she should tackle in her next play. He told her that the spread of HIV in the black community was overdue some attention. Samuel died a week after he gave Heyliger that advice. Although Samuel did not die of AIDS, Heyliger said she felt compelled to follow-through with his suggestion.

"I felt like I had been left with a mission," she said. Heyliger spent months researching the problem. She attended conventions, workshops and HIV awareness rallies. At these events she would often meet people who faced circumstances similar to those of her characters' in "What Would Jesus



Twins Yvonne Farrow (left) and Yvette Heyliger have been frequent guests at the NBTF. Photo by Kevin Walker

Do?" She won a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to write the play.

She has spent the past several months doing staged readings to get audience feedback and generate interest in hopes of getting the financing she needs to make "What Would Jesus Do?" a full-fledged stage production. The NBTF reading should take her a few steps closer to that goal.

Some big names are expected to be on hand to read her play today, including Bill Cobbs, Janet Hubert and Lamman Rucker. Heyliger's twin sister, Yvonne Farrow, is slated to read the part of the wife. The sisters run their own entertainment production company, Twinbiz, which has brought two productions to the National Black Theatre Festival: "Autobiography of a Homegirl" in 2001 and "Hillary and Monica" in 2003.

Black "straight" men who sleep with other men are said to be on the "down low." The term has become part of pop culture. It has been alleged that down low men are a key reason why the number of black women with HIV is so staggering. Others have complained that society's sudden obsession with the down low has only further strained black male/black female relations. Heyliger says her play doesn't exploit the current down low phenomenon or make judgments on the sexual lifestyles that people choose.

"The man in my play is just someone who struggles with his sexuality," she said. "It really doesn't matter who you sleep with. It matters that you protect yourself."

For more information about Heyliger and her play, log onto www.twinbiz.com.



She's Still Got It

Don't let her age fool you. Singing and Broadway legend Linda Hopkins can move with the best of them. Hopkins earned a round of applause Monday as she arrived at the Benton Convention Center for the Opening Night Gala.

The applause was not just because Hopkins, who was discovered by gospel great Mahalia Jackson, is a legend who has won both a Tony and Drama Desk Award. Hopkins earned the applause by dancing to the beat of the drums that greeted celebrities. Hopkins performed her little shimmy with ease, even though she uses walking sticks these days to get around.

Inside the Convention Center, where Hopkins received a Living Legend Award, Hopkins reminded folks that she was 80-years-old. Hopkins also told the 1,000 or so people on hand for the gala that she will receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in October, an honor that is way overdue.

WELCOME BACK



Actor Malik Yoba waves to fans as he arrives at the hotel Monday. The actor first came to the festival in 2003. Photo by Jason Pitt

Beaty

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son's emerging career while behind bars. His pride grew as Daniel's star rose higher and higher. Danny Beaty traveled from Dayton, Ohio — where Daniel Beaty was born and raised — to watch his son perform live for the first time.

"To me he is just totally fantastic," the elder Beaty said. Countless others agree. Daniel Beaty has received a lot of attention at the 2005 National Black Theatre Festival for his show, in which he plays 40 different characters. But none of that compares to the closeness that he now shares with his dad. It is a bond that he has wanted for so many years.

"I used to not be able to watch movies about fathers and sons," Daniel Beaty said Monday. "I remember going to see 'He Got Game' and going into the bathroom afterward and just crying."

Daniel followed a very different path than his father. Danny Beaty said he got his education from the school of hard knocks, where hustlers were the professors and petty crooks were the teacher's assistants. Daniel earned his Ivy League degree with honors, picking up one of Yale's top three graduation honors for his creative and performing arts talent.

Danny Beaty said he never feared that his son would follow in his footsteps. Daniel's mother, Shirley McGee, is a strong, proud woman, more than capable of keeping her kids (Daniel has a sister) on the straight and narrow. Danny Beaty, who has been estranged from Shirley McGee since their children were youngsters, said he also never touted his criminal life around his kids.

"When I would go visit them, I would put on a suit and tie. I would play a role like I was something that I wasn't," he said.

Despite his parents' efforts to keep him out of the loop, Daniel said he always knew that there was something off kilter.

"He was not around a lot. That let me know that something isn't right," Daniel said. By the time he was old enough to fully comprehend what that something was, Daniel's desire for a relationship with his father

had grown into a constant longing that was often painful. In an attempt to dull that pain, he visited his dad in prison during a holiday break from Yale.

"I needed to know who my father is," he said, recalling that visit. Letters back and forth followed that initial visit. Daniel returned to see his father whenever his school schedule would allow. It became clear to Daniel that his father equally craved a bond with him.

"I discovered that this man loves me. The choices he has made were never intended to hurt me," Daniel said.

Danny Beaty does not ever want to miss an important event in his son's life. He credits Shirley McGee with helping him to find God while he was behind bars.

"My answer was Christ," Danny Beaty said. "I had a revelation and I cried like a baby. I have done a complete one-eighty."

Although the younger Beaty is the one getting praise from everyone from show biz legends like Ruby Dee to the New York Times, Daniel says his father is a star in his eyes.

"I am so proud of him and the choices he is making for his life now," Daniel said.

"Emergence-See!" is being staged Aug. 4-6 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. at The Proscenium at N.C. School of the Arts. Tickets, which are \$35, can be purchased at the site or at the ticket desk at the Benton Convention Center.



Daniel Beaty and his mother, Shirley McGee, chat with Ruby Dee, who is a fan of Beaty's. Photo by Kevin Walker



Janet Hubert and James Avery

Like old times

If the 2005 National Black Theatre Festival is mistaken for a reunion of the sitcom "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," there is good reason. Among the dozens of celebrities attending this year's festival are three of the leading stars of the popular show, which aired on NBC for six seasons beginning in the fall of 1990.

Janet Hubert, who played mom Vivian Banks on the show for the first three seasons; James Avery, who played dad Philip Banks; and Joseph Marcell, who played Geoffrey, the butler with the killer one-liners, are all in town this week for the festival.

Hubert and Marcell are the celebrity co-chairs for the 2005 NBTF.

Hubert joked Monday about being back together with all of her old cast mates.

"This is like a family reunion. I ain't seen my husband in 12 years," she said during a news conference, generating laughs from a crowd of several hundred. Marcell continued the laughfest by adding that only NBTF mastermind Larry Leon Hamlin had the power to pull most of the show's cast back together.

"NBC could not do it. It took this man to do it," Marcell said, pointing to Hamlin.