

MAN OF A THOUSAND ROLES

Steady work for three decades has made Bill Cobbs a face that everyone knows

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

You may not know his name, but you surely know that face.

Bill Cobbs is one of those type of actors – the kind who master roles so effortlessly that you forget he's performing. So it's not acclaimed actor Bill Cobbs that filmgoers see playing "Devaney" – Whitney Houston's manager – in "The Bodyguard" or "Reginald" – one of a trio of seasoned gentlemen that try to swindle Ben Stiller – in "Night at the Museum." One of Cobbs' gifts is that his characters stand on their own.



Bill Cobbs is all smiles at the Opening Night Gala.

Although Cobbs maintains a steady schedule of acting gigs, he has rarely missed attending the National Black Theatre Festival over the last 20 years.

"I don't know if I have enough words to say what I think about (the NBTF)," he said before praising the biennial event for its family atmosphere and embracing nature.

The festival reminds Cobbs of New York City in the early 1970s – the time and place he began his acting career.

"We were on the cusp on the Civil Rights Movement," he said. "We had a lot of projects related to African-American subjects for the first time in our history."

Cobbs, a Cleveland native, took advantage of ever opportunity that came his way and in the process built an impressive resume for himself on stage and then in television and film.

The roles came with regularity. There were parts in films like "The Taking of Pelham One Two Three" and "Greased Lightning" in the early years, and steady guest appearances on hit sitcoms such as "Good Times."

While black actors have always been somewhat at a disadvantage in the entertainment industry, Cobbs says that he had it easier than others.

"I am standing on the shoulders of other people," he said before paying verbal homage to industry trailblazers like Sidney Poitier and Paul Robeson. "They had already done the really hard work."

Affable and regal, Cobbs is always one of the most popular celebrities at the festival. Even as he answered questions from a reporter, fans could not contain the excitement of being in the presence of a man who at this stage of his life and career is truly a legend. Cobbs indulged each of his admirers, interrupting his thoughts to wave, pose for pictures or simply to flash his big, friendly smile.

He is still a regular presence on the big and small screen. Cobbs has four projects in various stages of production, including the film "Black Water Transit" with Laurence Fishburne, Evan Ross and Aisha Tyler. But what

is most exciting to the actor these days are the acting classes he has begun to teach near his home in Upland, Calif.

"If you are trying to become an actor, I would suggest that you ask yourself why you want to be an actor," he said.

While he doesn't knock the desire that many showbiz wannabes have to be rich and famous, Cobbs says dedication to the craft must be paramount.

"Money and fame will come anyway, just work on being good at what you do," Cobbs recommended.

First Hamlin Scholarship awarded at UNCSA

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

Brooklyn-N.Y. native Shanomie Blackwood is the first-ever recipient of The Larry Leon Hamlin and Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin/Winston-Salem Urban League Endowed Scholarship at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

Blackwood will enter UNCSA later this month as a freshman in the School of Design and Production, where she will study scene design and technical direction. She has already arrived in Winston-Salem. She is occupying her days helping with this week's National Black Theatre Festival – doing tasks such as painting scenery for stage sets; working the soundboard; and helping out around the NBTF office.

The scholarship was announced soon after NBTF founder Larry Leon Hamlin's death in the summer of 2007. It will be awarded annually to a first-year undergraduate student, with preference given to students who will increase the diversity of



Shanomie Blackwood

the UNCSA student body. It is for students studying in either the School of Design and Production or the School of Drama, awarded in alternate years. Recipients must also complete internships with the NBTF.

"We are grateful that the Urban League has chosen to pay tribute to the 'marvastic' Larry Leon Hamlin and his wife, Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, in such an extraordinary way," said UNCSA Chancellor John Maueri. "This scholarship will benefit countless students who wish to keep the Hamlins' vision moving forward."

Eighteen-year-old Blackwood, the daughter of Benjamin Blackwood, graduated in June from LaGuardia Arts High School, where she has been actively involved in many areas of stagecraft. She completed an internship with the Kaufman Center in New York, where she built and painted scenery for children's summer workshops. She also won an Alumni & Friends Award at her high school graduation.

Wayans

from page A1

on the silver screen, often opposite her famous brothers Marlon, Shawn, Keenen and Damon, in cult classics like "Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood" and "A Low Down Dirty Shame." Wayans says theater was her first love.

"When I was a kid, I used to do theater... I always had a love for theater and a wish to do theater," she explained. "I was looking for an opportunity to let the world see the real Kim... I had a story to tell about my personal journey."

That opportunity came several years ago when Wayans, then plagued by anxiety attacks and unhappiness, embarked on a 10-day silent meditation retreat. The experienced irrevocably changed her perspective on life for the better, Wayans said. She now takes similar sabbaticals annually.

"I understood that I was so much more than I imagined myself to be," she remarked. "With that understanding, you move through the world in a different way."

Deeply moved by the experience, Wayans resolved to share her revelations with the world.

"I knew that I wanted to share my experience with people, but it was one of those things that didn't happen right away," Wayans said. "Then, in 2006, it just hit me like a ton of bricks exactly what to do... within a week, I had my piece."

The end result was her one-woman show, "A Handsome Woman Retreats," which opens tonight (Thursday) at the Summit School on Reynolda Road.

"The overall message would be the message of going inside yourself to find your happiness; going inside to find that



Kim Wayans in her one-woman show.

God in you," she said of the play. "...It's the joy of just being – the gift that God gives us everyday."

This marks Wayans' National Black Theatre Festival debut, but the actress-turned-playwright says the theater world likely hasn't seen the last of her.

"I love it because there's so much freedom; nobody's telling me anything," she said of writing and performing in her own show. "I don't have to be anything but what I feel like being. It's so liberating."

Wayans didn't stop with the play. She and her husband, Kevin Knotts (the play's producer), have co-authored a series of children's books about racially-mixed children. Wayans' 38 nieces and nephews, many of whom are multi-racial, served as the inspiration for the "Amy Hodgepodge" series, which features a girl who is Asian, African American and Caucasian. The books, which are jam-packed with wholesome messages, are meant to help fill a void in children's literature for interracial characters, Wayans said.

"We have a whole new generation of kids springing up that are... a little bit of everything," she noted. "(Amy) represents that generation."

Many of Amy's friends in the book are also racially mixed, Wayans says. The interracial couple is hopeful that all children will be able to see themselves in the books, she said.

Five "Amy Hodgepodge" books are currently available through Penguin Books, with two more slated for release next spring.

For more information on Kim Wayans, visit www.kimwayans.com. For more information on the Amy Hodgepodge series, visit www.amyhodgepodge.com. "A Handsome Woman Retreats" will be staged tonight (Aug. 6) at 8 p.m. and tomorrow (Aug. 7) at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Tickets, which are \$40, can be purchased at the ticket counter at the Benton Convention Center or at the Summit School before the start of the performance.

Notes



Actor Lou Myers hugs famed Lighting Designer Shirley Prendergast.

AN OLDIE BUT GOODIE

Black theater means many things to different people. For well-known actor Lou Myers, it is the only place where African-American performers can share their pain, joys, hopes and dreams in an unfiltered venue. It's where black folks can bare their souls and much, much more, says the actor.

"Here, we can tell the truth," Myers told a crowd of festival fans on Monday. "We can get butt-naked and let it all hang out!"

Myers has been an actor for decades. His credits include the long-running series "A Different World" and films like "Bulworth" and "The Fighting Temptations."

Though he is at the age when many people start to think about retirement, Myers says he is not ready to bow out just yet.

"The older we get, the better we get," he said.

PLAY CAST ARRIVES ON CP TIME

The cast of the play "Reunion at Bartersville" can provide laughs on and off stage. The actors made not one, but two memorable appearances this week at the very same NBTF press conference.

Only the show's director along with actress Amentha Dymally were present when the event began at noon. The others, including Aloma Wright, Hawthorne James, Jeris Lee Pindexter and Charlene Tilton, walked in about 30 minutes later. Wright, best known for her roles in the television series "Scrubs" and in movies like "Johnson Family Vacation," had an explanation.

"Sorry ya'll we were late, but you know with C.P. (Colored People) time and all," she said to laughs.

Dymally drew laughs too when she singled-out Tilton – known for playing Lucy Ewing on "Dallas" and "Bartersville's" only non-African American castmember – as "our white woman." The reference caused Tilton, and the crowd, to erupt with laughter.



Aloma Wright

MOUTHS OF BABES

This year's youngest celebrity guest had some of the most profound words to share with festival-goers. Actor/musician Qasim Middleton is expected to be a popular attraction at the NBTF's Teentastic events. The 14-year-old is best known for his role on Nickelodeon's



The Middleton Brothers

"The Naked Brothers Band" series. His younger brother, Zuhri, has also appeared on the popular show and on the Noggin Network's "Jack's Big Music Show."

Zuhri let his big brother do all of the talking when they were unexpectedly called up to say a few words at a NBTF news conference earlier this week. Unprepared, Qasim

got off his chest a problem he has with one fashion statement that has become popular with young black men in his age range.

"We are stereotyped as a people who like to wear our pants below our butts," he said with a slight look of disdain.

After making a joke about someone trying to run with their pants in such a position, he digressed.

"I don't want to get into a militant mode," he said smiling.