

NBTF

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Evans.

Xavier Pierce received the award for Outstanding Achievement in Lighting Design and Winston-Salem native French La'Vern was presented the award for Outstanding Achievement in Costume Design. Retired Winston-Salem State University professor Dr. Elwanda Ingram was presented the Theatre Arts & Humanitarian Award for her dedication to the festival and the N.C. Black Repertory Company (NC-BRC).

Outstanding Achievement in Scenic Design was awarded to James V. Thomas, Outstanding Achievement in Stage Management was awarded to Femi Sarah Heggie, and Black Spectrum Theatre Company, which is located in New York, received the Theatre Longevity Award. The Marvtastic Philanthropy Award was presented to a representative from BB&T.

Tony-nominated actor turned director Michele



Maria Howell sings at the 2019 NBTF Opening Night Gala, which was held on July 29.

Shay received the Lloyd Richards Director Award, and novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and professor, Pearl Cleage, was awarded the August Wilson Playwright Award. Chicago native Kamilah Forbes took home the Larry Leon Hamlin Producer Award.

A new award was presented during the gala this year as well. The Sylvia

Sprinkle-Hamlin Rolling World Premier Award was awarded to Nambi E. Kelley. Currently serving as playwright-in-residence at New Victory Theatre and The Dramatists Guild Foundation in New York City, Kelley has been commissioned by the N.C. Black Repertory Company to write "Maya," a stage production inspired by the life and legacy of the

late Maya Angelou. The award, named after NC-BRC board president and the widow of Larry Leon Hamlin, guarantees at least three regional productions of the play.

When she took the stage, Kelley thanked the NCBRC and NBTF for their continued support. She said, "Thank you, I am honored. I am blessed and my intention is to continue

to serve you all the days of my life."

The coveted Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award was presented to Tony and Emmy Award winner Leslie Uggams. A native of New York, Uggams got her start in theatre at the young age of six. By the time she was nine, Uggams was wowing crowds at the famous Apollo Theater. Throughout the 1960s, she showcased her talents on a range of shows including "Your Show of Shows," "The Milton Berle Show," "The Arthur Godfrey Show" and several others. She also made appearances on "Empire," "Nurse Jackie," and the blockbuster movies "Deadpool" and "Deadpool 2."

After receiving her award from her close friend, Andre De Shields, Uggams said she has always loved performing and being on stage. She said what helped her early on was having amazing mentors and actors to work with and that's what we need more of today to continue pushing Black The-

atre in the right direction.

"Even at six years old, I knew that I was working with greatness and I always tried to do what I needed to do to be successful and it has been a glorious time in this business," she said. "In this business, it's a family affair. That's what it's all about. We all have to help each other out. And I'm here to tell you that Black Theatre will be vibrant."

Following the gala, celebrity guests and festivalgoers traveled to the Stevens Center to see the opening production of "Jelly's Last Jam." Directed by Jackie Alexander and produced by the NC-BRC, the award-winning musical tells the story of innovator Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, who later became Jelly Roll Morto, a jazz pioneer.

The National Black Theatre Festival will run through Saturday, August 3. For more information and ticket prices visit <https://ncblackrep.org/nbtf-info/>.

NBTF record-breaking start reflects on the importance of the biennial festival

BY TEVIN STINSON
THE CHRONICLE

If you're strapped for cash and can't afford to spend \$40 or \$50 on a ticket to one of the productions during the National Black Theatre Festival, an easy and no-cost way to rub elbows with the stars

ing press conference on Monday, July 29, NBTF media director Brian McLaughlin, announced that plays this year have sold out faster than ever, which is a testament to the good job the selection committee did when narrowing the productions down to a select few.

which started on Monday, July 29 and ends on Saturday, August 3, will include more than 120 plays from 36 different states and South Africa, and much, much more, such as a film fest, International Colloquium, International Vendors Market, Words & Verses (formerly Midnight



Celebrity co-chair Chester Gregory addresses the crowd during the opening press conference of the National Black Theatre Festival.

is to attend the daily press conferences held at The Marriott Hotel.

Each day at noon during the festival, actors, directors, writers, and others with ties to the festival come together to discuss their productions and give the public a taste of what they might see during the festival. During the open-

"We have sold out shows the earliest we have in festival history. That tells me that the selection committee was awesome," continued McLaughlin. "We had so many submissions and they drilled it down to the best. You are in for a treat this week and we are very excited."

This year's festival,

Poetry Jam), several workshops and seminars, a National Youth Talent Showcase, and the Larry Leon Hamlin Solo Performance Series, just to name a few.

While the press conference serves as a guide to what's what at the festival, the celebrity guests use the time to talk about their past experiences at



Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award recipient Leslie Uggams during the NBTF opening press conference earlier this week.



Photos by Tevin Stinson

National Black Theatre Festival celebrity co-chair Margaret "Suge" Avery during the opening press conference on Monday, July 29, at The Marriott Hotel.

the festival and why they continue to come back. Celebrity co-chairs Margaret "Suge" Avery and Chester Gregory said they were grateful to serve as co-chairs of such an important event.

NBTF has given him the support he needed to pursue his goals.

"Since the very beginning you all have been there. This always feels like home and I'll never forget the first time I had

Gregory at the press conference were: Andre De Shields, Bill Cobbs, Leslie Uggams, Ted Lange, Keith David, Colby Christina, Qasim Middleton, Khalil Middleton and several others.



Andre De Shields leads everyone in singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" during the opening press conference of the National Black Theatre Festival.

"I just want to let you know how much we actors and people in theatre appreciate all your support," Avery said.

Gregory, who is the only actor to headline the National Black Theatre Festival three times, said it felt awesome to be back on Black Theatre Holy Ground. He said since the beginning of his career, the

a chance to perform here. I got a chance to meet the great Andre De Shields and he took me under his wing to be my friend and mentor," continued Gregory. "He told me things that opening night that prepared me for ten-plus years in Broadway musicals."

Other celebrity guests who joined Avery and

The daily press conference is held in the lobby of the Marriot Hotel, 425 North Cherry Street. The press conference is free, but if you plan on attending, you may want to get there early because seats go fast.

For more information on the National Black Theatre Festival, visit <https://ncblackrep.org/nbtf-info/>.

CONTACTING THE CHRONICLE

www.wschronicle.com

1300 E. Fifth St., Winston Salem, N.C. 27101

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