

**Larry Leon Hamlin** was nationally and internationally known for his profound contributions to Black theater in America.

He was celebrated twice at the White House upon receiving two personal invitations from former President and Mrs. William Clinton to attend The Recipients of the National Medal of Arts and The Charles Frankel Prize Awards. He was a professional actor, director and playwright. His acting experience includes stage, film and television. Mr. Hamlin wrote four full-length plays, two info-dramas and directed more than 200 productions. Also, he was the only American producer and artistic director to produce eight **National Black Theatre Festivals®**.

Mr. Hamlin received theater training at Brown University under the direction of the late George Houston Bass as a member of Rites and Reason Theatre Company. His business education was earned at Johnson & Wales University. He lectured on Black theater at such prestigious institutions as Yale University School of Drama, University of Connecticut, New York University and Brown University. He often provided artistic and administrative consultation to numerous Black theater companies and was honored with more than 80 awards and citations for his contributions to the theatrical field.

In 1979 Hamlin returned home from Providence, R.I., due to a family emergency. Seeking to continue his successful career as an artistic director, producer and actor and with a \$1,000 investment from his father, he founded the NCBRC, the first professional African American theatre company in North Carolina. To introduce his new company to the community and build support for it, Hamlin created "Living Room" theatre. Asking several community leaders to invite eight to ten people to their homes, he presented his vision for the Company and with four to eight other actors offered excerpts from one of the Black theatre classics.

In 1981 Hamlin founded the NCBRC Theatre Guild to increase attendance and gain financial support for the Company. In 1984 the NCBRC became the first African American company to become a funded member of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Arts Council, receiving a \$3,000 grant. Dedicated to maintaining a professional company, Hamlin held auditions in New York and brought actors to Winston-Salem for his productions.

In 2003, he founded the Marvtastic Society, a giving organization to support the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF). In 2015, the Society contributed more than \$45,000 to support the NBTF.

Mr. Hamlin was the founder, producer and artistic director of the National Black Theatre Festival® (NBTF), one of the most historic and culturally significant events, not only in the history of Black theater but also in American theater. This event is held biennially in the City of Winston Salem, NC.

At a 1988 conference in Atlanta, Hamlin heard a discussion on the plight of African American theatres across the country and realized they all faced similar challenges when it came to sustainability. He formed a new dream, of uniting these companies to ensure the survival of Black theatre into the next millennium. After much thought, discussion with others and weighing of alternatives, he decided that a national theatre festival would be the best approach. With such a festival, companies would be able to perform before the general public and raise awareness of the quality and importance of their work.

Hamlin approached Dr. Maya Angelou and convinced her to assist him. Dr. Angelou served as chairperson of the first NCBRC-produced National Black Theatre Festival®. She invited Oprah Winfrey as well as the cast from the Broadway production of "The Blacks," a play in which she starred, as special celebrity guests. The 1989 Festival offered 30 performances by 17 of America's best professional Black theatre companies. More than 10,000 people attended. The event attracted national and international media coverage. The New York Times called it "one of the most historic and cultural events in the history of Black theatre and American theatre in

general.” Subsequent Festivals have continued this tradition of providing an unparalleled artistic, intellectual and celebratory experience for performers and audiences alike.

While at the helm of the World Black Theatre Movement, Mr. Hamlin dared to connect Black theater and production companies globally. His vision was to create a nurturing environment for these entities to network and share tangible and artistic resources. By doing so, they are strengthened, enriched and evolve into cultural oasis in their communities.

As the Festival looks back on its beginnings, it has numerous accomplishments to celebrate. From a spectacular opening in 1989, the number of productions and theatre companies participating has continued to grow to over 30 companies with more than 100 performances. Theatre and production companies have provided exciting new plays, intimate one-person shows, musicals that had audiences dancing in the aisles and historical representations that brought tears to the eyes of many. The International Colloquium has supported discussions on a variety of topics ranging from the future of Black theatre to the relevance of African American women in that future. From the Midnight Poetry Jams to late night conversations, the Festival has created dialogue, debate and lots of standing ovations.

Hamlin’s creative spark and vision continue to ignite the Festival’s ongoing success, even after his death. Since 1989, it has also moved beyond a limited number of venues to virtually every performance space available in Winston-Salem. Attendance and audience diversity have increased over the years, as has the revenue generated for the local and regional community through hotel rooms, restaurants and other local attractions. The community has become a favored destination for new and returning visitors.

According to Visit Winston-Salem, the NBTF has contributed approximately \$220 million to the Winston-Salem economy since 1989. They also reported that the 2015 NBTF produced more than 3,300 hotel rooms and approximately \$7.5 million in visitor spending and economic impact (a tourism-industry calculation).

Hamlin’s legacy continues. The North Carolina Black Repertory Company is now studying the opportunity to build a National Black Theatre Hall of Fame and Museum in W-S that will preserve the contributions of American black theatre, playwrights, directors, actors, and others of lasting artistic significance in the genre.

A native of Reidsville, NC, Mr. Hamlin was born Sept. 25, 1948 and died June 6, 2007 at age 58.