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Gentle giant of local black theatre remembered



Ralph Greene

Unity Theatre Ensemble founder Ralph Greene passes at 78

By Kenya Vaughn
Of The St. Louis American

Ralph Greene, a pioneering producer of black theater known for his cultivation of talent for the stage through Unity Theatre Ensemble, passed away on May 15.

His death came after a series of health challenges that stemmed from a pair of strokes he suffered nearly ten years ago. He was 78. Just as she was with every production as Unity's Managing Director, his wife Bonnie Harmon was right by his side.

"We unite for the success of the show." This was the mantra that Greene had the casts of Unity Theatre Ensemble productions repeat before every performance," Harmon said. "The company of actors and technicians were the instruments and

See Greene, B2

'The feel-good movie of quarantine'



Kelvin Harrison Jr.

Kelvin Harrison Jr. of 'The High Note' praises new film with Tracee Ellis Ross

By Kenya Vaughn
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Kelvin Harrison Jr. knew from the feeling that overcame him and co-star Tracee Ellis Ross when listening to rough cuts of songs from the soundtrack that they had found something special in "The High Note."

They laughed. They cried. They connected with their respective roles in an indescribable way.

"I think it was that moment dancing with Tracee and doing fake choreography," Harrison said. "Singing along to songs with our voices

on them was kind of the most insane thing that has happened. We both knew we were in it – and we knew it was something special."

Harrison is confident that the same energy will wash over everyone who watches the film when it lands on demand May 29. Originally set for a theatrical release, COVID-19 had other plans. But he feels that audiences will be thrilled that the release will go on through their screens at home.

"If you are looking for a good laugh, if you are looking for a good cuddle – even if it's just with your pillow; if you are looking to see Tracee Ellis Ross give nostalgic Diana Ross moments; if you are looking for the feel good

movie of quarantine, then 'The High Note' is your movie."

Harrison and Ross seemed destined to play their respective roles.

In the film, Ross is Grace Davis – a pop diva at a crossroads in her career as she faces middle age. Harrison plays David, an aspiring singer who catches the eye of Davis' assistant as she seeks out talent to hone her craft as a producer.

The relationship dynamics between Davis' assistant Molly, played by Dakota Johnson, Davis' manager, played by Ice Cube and

See Movie, B2

'Bubbling Brown Sugar' bumped to Season 45

Black Rep's season delayed, annual gala goes virtual in response to COVID-19

By Kenya Vaughn
Of The St. Louis American

COVID-19 has continued to bring bad news to the arts community as social distancing precautions make the traditional audience experience not in the best interest of the health of patrons.

On the Friday before Memorial Day, The Black Rep announced that it had made the painful decision to push its fall musical, the immensely popular black Broadway classic "Bubbling Brown Sugar" to the front of season 45 as opposed to the fall production for the start of season 44 – which is now set to start in January 2021.

"We were looking forward to opening with Bubbling Brown Sugar, but we're not sure what the world post-COVID will be," said Ron Himes, founder and producing director of The Black Rep. "But we know things will not be business as usual."

Even if they had been able to present a September show, Himes said that they were in talks of a substitute for "Bubbling," a musical that the Black Rep has been producing for much of its



Ron Himes with rapper-turned-actor Tef Poe on the set of Ntozake Shange's "Spell #7." The popular production became the final show of season 43, when an extended run of the play was shut down and the season finale of "Marie and Rosetta" was canceled due to COVID-19.

the show was a huge risk with respect to box office returns as people would still be tiptoeing into patronizing activities that present a challenge to social distancing.

The company was mindful of this when they decided to restructure their annual fall gala – which typically takes place in November – into a virtual event. The gala will take place on November 14, with details released as the event nears.

Himes says that the silver lining in the impact of COVID-19 is that his board is active and energized in their efforts to make sure that

See Black Rep, B2

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St. Louis County Library to offer curbside service starting June 3

St. Louis County Library will begin offering curbside service at all 20 branches on Wednesday, June 3. This contact-free service allows patrons to reserve and pick up books, movies and more while practicing social distancing.



Greene

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being unified gave strength and effectiveness to the message being conveyed to the audience."

Unity was renowned for offering a platform for aspiring stage performers.

"Mr. Greene with his wife Bonnie at his side changed my life and the lives of so many people who decided to step onto a performance stage," said singer and actress Mardra Thomas. "He was a gentle giant who poured his beautiful spirit and wisdom into so many people and kick-started careers from SIUE's Broadway campus to 'Broadway' and beyond. When challenged with changes, he taught me how to make adjustments – on the stage and in life."

A native of Jacksonville, Florida and an accomplished director of theater, playwright, lyricist and arts administrator, in 1971, Greene founded Kutana Players as a graduate assistantship project while he studied at Southern University at Carbondale. His intention was to give African American theater majors a chance to grace the stage in roles beyond the stereotypical characters of butlers and maids.

In 1974, Greene served as stage manager for the theater and music departments collaborative production of Scott Joplin's "Treemonisha." The guest director, Miss Katherine Dunham, invited Greene to come and develop the theater training component



Unity Theatre Ensemble in a past performance of "I Got The Music In Me."

at the Performing Arts Training Center at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, East St. Louis Center.

"For him, theater was not just entertainment," Harmon said. "But a way to teach, inspire, motivate and to sometimes question its audience."

From September 1974 to February 1996, his troupe was the resident theater company at the Katherine Dunham Center for the Performing Arts (KDCPA).

"Back in the day I had the privilege of working with Ralph Greene and The Kutana Players," said Ron

Himes, founder and producing director of The St. Louis Black Repertory Company. "His direction strengthened my foundation as a young artist attempting to develop his craft."

In September 1979, the company's name was changed from Kutana Players ("Kutana" is Swahili for "coming together") to Unity Ensemble and, in 1984, to Unity Theatre Ensemble.

After their partnership with the Dunham Center ended, Unity headed across the water to St. Louis where they called Greeley's 23rd Street Theatre home until the space closed in

2002. They produced countless shows within the canon of African American theater, created original work and sometimes adapted musical films for the stage – such as "Sparkle." They continued to produce shows at other venue spaces, most recently at the Ivory Theatre.

Watching Greene during rehearsal was fascinating, because he bucked every negative stereotype of the neurotic process and antics often associated with directors.

"He rarely raised his voice and always sought to keep harmony amidst the chaos," Harmon said. "He knew that

everything would come together for a successful outcome. And somehow it always did!"

He was so nurturing and supportive that many who were groomed for the stage through Unity refer to Greene and Harmon as their "theater mother" and theater father."

Actor and singer Herman Louis Gordon Jr. is one of them.

"He took a chance on me back in 1998 – my first professional show," said Gordon. "He pushed and trained. I never thought I would work in theater. I just wanted to sing. Now I can't get away from it."

And for everything he poured into his "theater children," his son Ralph E. Greene Jr., received a double portion.

"My father was an artist in every sense of the word," said the younger Greene. "My life was spent watching him write and produce show after show to support his family and to put out his art."

He followed in his father's footsteps into the entertainment industry, currently working as supervising producer for the Netflix series, Family Reunion:

"He worked tirelessly to present theater that entertained, inspired and most importantly to him... taught," said Ralph Greene Jr. "He was a teacher in his soul. A soft-spoken man who let his works do his talking. Through the years he touched many people's lives through his art and direction. He made people believe in themselves and he gave back in the form of community outreach projects."

The last show he directed was Unity's "Everything Must Change." The musical revue also featured poetry, dance and prose – and starred some of the company veterans. The show was a fitting final curtain for a man who had been producing theater that offers context and celebration of the black experience for nearly a half-century.

"He will be missed, but his spirit will stay alive in those he touched," Himes said.

Harmon vows to carry on his vision and the company that they poured into as life and work partners.

"Greene and I were united until the end," Harmon said. "I will miss him greatly in the body, but I know he will be with me every step of the way as we continue his work."

He was preceded in death by his father, Major Greene; mother, Iraazona Knight-Greene; brother, Isaac Greene; and sister, Angie Nora Greene-Barlow; and stepdaughter, Marie Girardeau-Bianchetta.

A memorial fund will be established in his name to honor and continue his legacy with the goal to support developing young playwrights and performing artists. Because of the current social distancing requirements, a legacy memorial will be planned for some time in the future when it is clearly safe again for large gatherings. Expressions of condolence can be sent to Unity Theatre Ensemble at P.O. Box 1035, Florissant, Missouri 63031 or to 1832 Partridge Berry Drive, Florissant, Missouri, 63031.

Movie

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David make for music industry insight and a romantic comedy that tugs at heart strings from beyond just the romance.

Harrison has been making a splash on the film scene in the past couple of years, particularly with his role in the film "Waves" – which co-stars St. Louis' own Sterling K. Brown. He is also a member of the ensemble of the highly anticipated "Chicago Seven."

But "The High Note" presented a new opportunity for him in that he was able to marry his love of acting with his love of singing.

"It is the ultimate when it comes to expressing yourself," Harrison said. "That's why I love musicals so much. I remember sitting in 'Dreamgirls' when I was a kid and listening to Jamie Foxx, Beyoncé, Jennifer Hudson and

all those people and watching the audience stand up during the musical. That's how great they were. The feeling that comes out of song and performance is like nothing else."

The son of highly regarded musicians in his native New Orleans, Harrison got his start in musicals. He starred in "Hairspray" with his little sister.

"I played Stevie and she played little Inez," Harrison said. "That was such a magical experience and this movie allowed me to do that through film – which is my new love. It's been such a rewarding experience and an even greater gift to be able to do it with Tracee."

It's no easy feat – especially when it comes to finding the voice of a character as opposed to just singing as he would as a musician.

"David is a little more pop. We were really trying to figure out where his voice sat," Harrison said. "We did a variety of different sounds. Some were a little more boy band or



Kelvin Harrison Jr. and Dakota Johnson in "The High Note."

Jenkins was critical.

"He has worked with Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson and the list goes on," Harrison said. "He knew what he had to do to get it out of me. He knew what that young, scared artist looks like. He helped me make those words mine – as if I wrote them. Who am I singing this to? That experience with him really changed the way I looked at music and approach music."

He felt parallels within the character surrounding his own upbringing and the insecurities regarding his musical talent because of it.

"My parents are wonderful musicians and I was scared," Harrison said. "I was like, 'What if I don't live up to that expectation? I didn't have that mindset of perseverance. I wanted to run away from it. That's why I did acting. By doing this film I wanted to perpetuate perseverance – that it does work if you commit."

He hopes that people find as much inspiration in Ross' por-

trayal of Davis as he did.

"I want people to know who they are and what they have to offer," Harrison said. "That was one of the things I respected about Tracee's performance of the character of Grace was that this was a woman who knew she had a gift. She knew she had something to share and she knew people needed it and wanted it – and she never allowed the industry to dictate to her what that was going to be."

He believes the film will lend the opportunity for audiences to remind themselves that they have so much to bring to the table – and to not limit themselves or diminish their light because of other people's insecurities and their attempt to control their narrative.

"Own your own story," Harrison said. "And you don't need to wait for someone to give you license to step into what you feel called, led or gifted to do."

The High Note will be released on demand on Friday, May 29. The film is rated PG-13 with a running time of 113 minutes. For more information, visit <https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-high-note>.

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Black Rep

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The Black Rep is not a casualty of the pandemic – and not only survives but thrives.

"Philanthropy will have a lot to do with how we come out of this," Himes said. "Our capacity to fundraise and garner the kind of corporate and foundation support that is so integral to us being able to do the work we've been able to do."

He had to end his season early, but this time of year is typically set aside for rest, rejuvenation, restoration and strategy.

"Our season would just now be ending," Himes said. "It's not like some of those other companies – like Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, St. Louis Shakespeare and The Muny – who had shows scheduled to open next month."

He's reading plays, shuffling schedules and discussing alternative options depending what budgets will allow.

Himes is also using this opportunity to team up with other artists and producers. He has formed a cohort with Tef Poe, who made his Black Rep stage debut in Ntozake

Shange's "Spell #7," and multidisciplinary artists Kristian Blackmon and Cheeraz Gorman.

"We are brainstorming right now," Himes said. "Meeting and talking about possible projects and hopefully come out with something in the fall that might not call for us to need a full theatre – that might call for us to be in a space that would be limited capacity. In experimenting with the piece, we would also experiment as far as how and where we would produce it."

Another bright side for Himes is that moving "Bubbling Brown Sugar" already has him looking forward to season 45.

"We will already know what season 45 is because a couple of things we had been looking forward to using this upcoming season will move to next season," Himes said.

As he meets and discusses what's to come with the artistic and production partners that will help him stage season 44 and 45, Himes is in fantastic spirits.

"I'm hopeful. I'm optimistic and like James Brown said, 'I feel good.'"

For more information on The Black Rep, visit www.theblackrep.org.