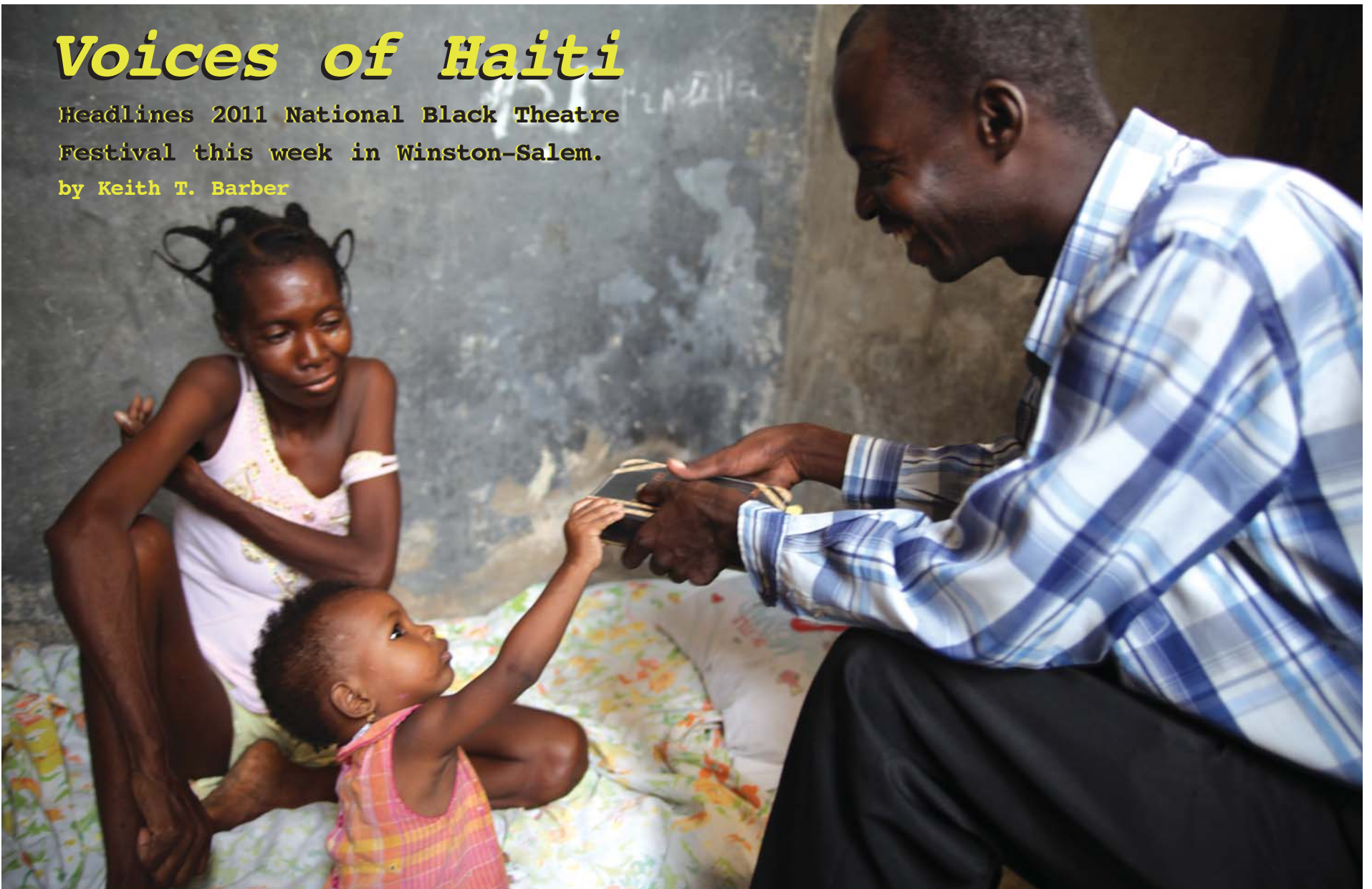


Voices of Haiti

Headlines 2011 National Black Theatre Festival this week in Winston-Salem.

by Keith T. Barber



Still from visual poem Job. (photo by Andre Lambertson, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, 2010)

On Jan. 10, 2010 poet Kwame Dawes was attending a writer’s workshop in Oregon when he heard the news. A devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake had struck just outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti, reducing the Caribbean nation’s capital to rubble. A native of Ghana, Dawes grew up in Jamaica. He could empathize with the millions impacted by the worst earthquake in 200 years. While glued to his television set watching continuing coverage of the earthquake’s aftermath, Dawes’ phone rang. It was Andre Lambertson, a talented photojournalist with whom he had collaborated on a mixed-media project called *Ashes*. “[Andre] said he really wanted to go to Haiti to cover the earthquake,” Dawes recalled.

Lambertson told Dawes he was hoping to

get award-winning journalist Lisa Armstrong to accompany him on his journey and get the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting on board. Dawes has a strong track record with the Pulitzer Center. Several years ago, the award-winning, non-profit journalism organization sent Dawes to his home country to report on the human stories at the heart of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Dawes wrote poems about the everyday people of Jamaica struggling with the disease and collaborated with composer Kevin Simmonds to create *Live Hope Love*, a literary and musical tapestry of enormous power. *Live Hope Love* is “a journey into the human face of this clinical thing called disease,” Dawes said.

Dawes and Simmonds presented *Live Hope Love* during the 2009 National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem. Founded in 1989,

the National Black Theatre Festival draws more than 65,000 people to the six-day event. The 2009 festival marked the event’s 20th anniversary. The National Black Theatre Festival runs from Aug. 1-6 in Winston-Salem and features more than 100 theatrical performances, workshops and seminars.

Dawes and Simmonds return to this year’s festival with *Voices of Haiti: A Post-Quake Odyssey in Verse*. The multi-media performance will interweave Lambertson’s photographs, Simmonds’ musical score and Dawes’ poems about life after the quake.

The second and final performance of *Voices of Haiti* is Wednesday, Aug. 3 at 8 p.m. inside Gray Auditorium at the Old Salem Visitor Center.

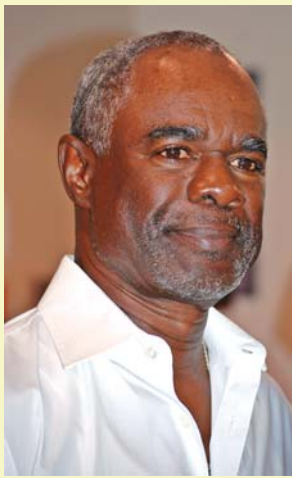
John Sawyer, executive director of the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, said after

the earthquake, the Pulitzer Center organized four groups of journalists who reported stories that touched on everything from state of education in a post-earthquake Haiti, the environment and the process of reconstruction.

The mainstream media picked up on the work by the Pulitzer Center’s journalists late last year. *USA Today* did a four-part series on the Pulitzer Center’s innovative approach to covering the earthquake and the National Press Club gave the nonprofit the top prize for best online journalism.

“We got a lot of media attention for our coverage of Haiti in part because it was unusual,” Sawyer said. “One thing the video poetry accomplished, it lets you see it more from the inside out, not the outside in.”

“Anytime you have mass deaths on the scale of Haiti, there’s a tendency in journalism



Scenes from the opening night of the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem. (photos by Quentin L Richardson)

Clockwise from top left: Actor Glynn Turman; Actor Hal Williams (center) with fans; Actress Kellita Smith, known for her role as the wife of the late actor/comedian Bernie Mac of the famed "Bernie Mac Show"; Actress Dawn Lewis (left) and entertainment manager Tiant McCoy; Mayor of Winston-Salem, NC Allen Joines (right); Actor Ted Lange (left) and guest.



from the disease.

Despite the unimaginable death and destruction, Dawes discovered a resilient people when he walked the streets of Port-au-Prince.

"Some were still in shock but there was an incredible amount of resourcefulness in people, there was a clear commitment to find a way back," Dawes said. "Whether it was people trying to sell their wares, whether it was doctors trying to deal with the crises, there was a sense that life had to go on and people were pushing forward."

The fact that more than 300,000 people died in the earthquake made it inevitable that every person he spoke with in the street was affected by a death. Influenced by *Live Hope Love*, Dawes was particularly interested in how people living with HIV/AIDS were coping with the seemingly endless aftermath.

"The great concern was people who were on anti-retroviral drugs, would they have access to the drugs? The anxiety was would the remarkable gains made in reducing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in past seven years, whether those advances would be reversed," Dawes said.

The resilience of Haitians living with HIV/AIDS was revealed in the earthquake's aftermath as they banded together to ensure their survival.

"Those kind of miracles of circumstance were very striking to me," Dawes said.

Miracles in the midst of devastation became a theme of Dawes' work based on his time in Haiti. But once he arrived in Port-au-Prince, his last thought was composing poems.

"I didn't really go to Haiti to write poems," Dawes confides. "I went to Haiti to write on people living with [HIV/AIDS] and report with videos and documentaries."

As with *Live Hope Love*, Dawes traveled to the epicenter of the earthquake disaster "to be a human being in that space," he said.

Dawes then described his creative process as no different than when he writes a poem about a tree, bullying in school or the love between his wife and himself.

"The creative process is very simple: I live the life of my experience and the moments that hit me," he said. "Writing poetry is a way to process the emotion of the experience."

The work in Haiti entailed numerous interviews with residents of the Caribbean nation, but the substance of those interviews never made it into Dawes' poems.

"It would be someone repeating a phrase or a young boy asking me the question, 'What did my mother do?'" Dawes said. "It was an existential question because he contracted the [HIV/AIDS] from her at birth. It touches on the unpredictability and uncertainty in human life."

Striking images such as that of a woman taking coffee each morning at the tomb of her two sons stay with Dawes to this day. His artistic process

can best be described as the search for beauty in experience.

"Not beauty in that which is pretty or lovely but beauty that has grace in it," Dawes elaborated. "It can be brutish and ugly but still be beautiful. That's what I hope happens in these poems."

Upon his return from Haiti, Dawes and Simmonds began their collaboration on the musical component of *Voices of Haiti*. The Pulitzer Center had already engaged Simmonds to write a musical score for a short documentary film about the earthquake, which gave him a good head start on the spoken word project. With several compositions completed, Simmonds turned over the reins to Dawes and allowed him to decide where the musical pieces will fit into the larger theatrical piece.

Simmonds said Valetta Brinson, a talented vocalist who performed in *Hope & Wisteria*, Dawes' performance at the 2009 National Black Theatre Festival, returns to the stage for *Voices of Haiti*. Brinson, Simmonds and Dawes will sing all the songs in the program.


"Kwame is able to go to a place to find a multitude of things — tenderness, pain and cause for celebration," Simmonds said. "I hope that you'll be able to feel those things in the music. It was devastating what happened to Haiti, but when Kwame was there, he also found hope."

Dawes last visited Haiti in December and started writing poems in January. He has shared his poems with the world in a number of formal and informal venues.

"The overwhelming response from people, was that they knew of the earthquake, they were moved by the tragedy and some had even given money to help people in the earthquake, but they saw the victims of the earthquake were somewhere else, not related to them in any way," Dawes said. "But the poems made them start to think of the people as family members and close friends."

Dawes hopes his audience reaches the same insight he discovered during his time in Haiti as they listen to his poetry set to the music of Simmonds and Brinson.

"[The tragedy] is in me — they are my mother, my brother, my child," Dawes said. "That is gratifying because that was my experience. As I met people I began to care for them and they looked after me, they cared for me. With that kind of intimacy, the poems had to be true."

"I think that's the value of poetry," Dawes continued. "In the performances we are doing, I hope that will be conveyed." 

wanna go?

Voices of Haiti: A Post-Quake Odyssey in Verse, Wednesday, Aug. 3 at 8 p.m., Gray Auditorium at the Old Salem Visitor Center, Winston-Salem. Tickets are \$25. For further info, call 336.723.7920.



2011 National Black Theatre Festival schedule

Tickets available at www.nbt.org

A CHARLESTON OLIO (SonEdna Foundation, Inc., Charleston, MS) Salem College – Hanes Auditorium: Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$30 (#49), Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$30 (#68), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$30 (#92)

A SONG FOR YOU...LENA — The Civil Rights Journey of a Negro Woman: Lena Calhoun Horne Reynolda House Museum of American Art: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#37), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#53)

ACCEPT "EXCEPT" (Dr. Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre, Inc., New York, NY.) Wake Forest #2 – The Ring Theatre: Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#67), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#89), Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#104), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#116)

ALL AMERICAN GIRLS: A NEGRO LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN (The Layan Gray Experience & The Black Gents of Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA) Salem College – Shirley Recital Hall: Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#69), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#93), Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#107), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#119)

BEFORE THE PEOPLE CAME (Amun Ra Theatre, Nashville, TN.) M.C. Benton Convention Center – Lower Level: Wed 8/3 10:00 am, \$10 (#26), Wed 8/3 1:00 p.m., \$10 (#27)

BIG MAMA SPEAKS: A 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Survivor's Story (Lions & Butterflies Artswork, Tulsa, OK.) Reynolda House Museum of American Art: Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#71), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#95) Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#108), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#121)

BONITA & BILLIE (A Bit Brisk Productions, Los Angeles, CA.) Reynolda House Museum of American Art: Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37, (#71), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#95) Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#108), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#121)

BY A BLACK HAND (North Carolina Black Repertory Company, Winston-Salem, NC.) M.C. Benton Convention Center – North Hall: Wed 8/3 10:00 am, \$10 (#25), Fri 8/5 10:00 am, \$10 (#75), Sat 8/6 11:00 am, \$10 (#98)

COUNTY OF KINGS (Cultural Odyssey, San Francisco, CA.) Salem College – The Drama Workshop Theatre: Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#51), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#94)

da Kink in my Hair (Trey Anthony Studios, Toronto, Canada.) UNCSA #1 – The Thrust: Fri 8/5 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#80), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#90) Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#105), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#117)

DID YOU DO YOUR HOMEWORK? (KIKI B Productions, Los Angeles, CA.) Summit School Black Box Theatre: Fri 8/5 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#82), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#96), Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#109), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#122)

DR. MAY EDWARD CHINN (RACCA's Seaport Salon, New York, NY.) Wake Forest #2 – The Ring Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#33), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#46)

"EVERY FESTIVAL FROM 1989-2011" – RHO-DESSA JONES & IDRIS ACKAMOOOR: A RETROSPECTIVE. Salem College – The Drama Workshop Theatre" Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#120)

FEET ON THE CEILING (Love & Lite, Inc., Los Angeles, CA.) Wake Forest #1 – The Main Stage Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$40 (#32), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$40 (#45) Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$40 (#66)

FOUR QUEENS - NO TRUMP (North Carolina Black Repertory Co., Winston-Salem, NC) Arts Council Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#29), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#43), Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#63)

HOPE SPEAKS (The Movement Theatre Company, New York, NY.) Summit School Black Box Theatre: Fri 8/5 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#82), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#96) Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#109), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m. \$37 (#122)

I STILL LOVE H.E.R. (atributetohiphop) (Theori Media, Inc., Chicago, IL.) M.C. Benton Convention Center – North Hall: Wed 8/3 10:00 am, \$10 (#25), Fri 8/5 10:00 am, \$10 (#75), Sat 8/6 11:00 am, \$10 (#98)

INCOGNITO (Incognito, Inc., Chicago, IL & Carl Nelson & Associates, New York, NY.) Summit School Black Box Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#38), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#54), Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#72)

JUNETEENTH BLUES CABARET (Juneteenth Legacy Theatre, New York, NY.) Salem College – Shirley Recital Hall: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#36), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#50)

KNOCK ME A KISS (New Federal Theatre, New York, NY in association with Legacy Creative Arts Company, Chicago, IL) Hanesbrands Theatre – Milton Rhodes Center for the Arts: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$40 (#28), Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$40 (#42), Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$40 (#62)

LILLIAS WHITE... LIVE! AT BLACK THEATRE HOLY GROUND (Lillias White Productions, New York, NY.) University of North Carolina School of the Arts Stevens Center: Wed 8/3 8:00 p.m., \$44 (#41), Fri 8/5 8:00 p.m., \$44

(#83), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m., \$44 (#110)

MIRROR, MIRROR OF MY SOUL (Cultural Odyssey, San Francisco, CA.) Salem College – The Drama Workshop Theatre: Thurs 8/4 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#70)

M.O.I.S.T.! (AI & Mo Productions, Los Angeles, CA.) Reese Theatre in the Pavilion – Embassy Suites: Thurs 8/4 10:30 p.m., \$37 (#74), Fri 8/5 10:30 p.m., \$37 (#97), Sat 8/6 10:30 p.m. \$37 (#123)

MOTHER TO MOTHER (FreeVoice Productions, Cape Town, South Africa.) UNCSA #2 – The Catawba: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$37 (#35), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$37 (#48) Thurs 8/4 3:00p.m., \$37 (#60)

NATIONAL YOUTH TALENT SHOWCASE M.C. Benton Convention Center – Lower Level: Thurs 8/4 12:00p.m., \$10 (#58), Fri 8/5 12:00p.m., \$10 (#76)

PAIGE IN FULL: A B-Girl's Visual Mixtape (B-Fly Entertainment, Washington, DC.) M.C. Benton Convention Center – North Hall: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$20 (#40), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$20 (#56), Thurs 8/4 8:00p.m., \$20 (#73)

ResurGENTS: THE REAPPEARANCE OF HOPE (Obsidian Media Group, New York, NY.) Wake Forest #2 – The Ring Theatre: Thurs 8/4 8:00p.m., \$37 (#67), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$37 (#89), Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$37 (#104), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m., \$37 (#116)

ROUTE 66: FINDING NAT KING COLE (Amun Ra Theatre, Nashville, TN.) Wake Forest #2 – The Ring Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$37 (#33), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$37 (#46)

SAME TRAIN (Two i's Two t's Productions, Brooklyn, NY.) Reese Theatre in the Pavilion – Embassy Suites: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$37 (#39), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$37 (#55)

SEXPHOBIAS (Cultural Odyssey, San Francisco, CA.) Salem College – The Drama Workshop Theatre: Thurs 8/4 8:00p.m., \$37 (#70)

SHAKIN' THE MESS OUTTA MISERY (North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC.) WSSU-Dillard Auditorium, Anderson Center: Thurs 8/4, 8:00p.m., \$25 (#65), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$25 (#87), Sat 8/6 3:00 p.m., \$25 (#102), Sat 8/6 8:00p.m., \$25 (#114)

SOUL ON FIRE THE MUSICAL (Onyx Vizion Productions, Oklahoma City, OK.) K. R. Williams Auditorium: Wed 8/3 3:00 p.m., \$37 (#30), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m. \$37 (#44)

STORYTELLING FESTIVAL (Storytellers from across North Carolina.) M.C. Benton Convention Center – Lower Level: Thurs 8/4 10:00a.m., \$7 (#57), Thurs 8/4 3:00 p.m., \$7 (#61)

THE LEGEND OF BUSTER NEAL (Billie Holiday Theatre, Brooklyn, NY.) Hanesbrands Theatre– Milton Rhodes Center for the Arts: Fri 8/5 3:00p.m., \$37 (#77), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$37 (#84), Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$37 (#99), Sat 8/6 8:00p.m., \$37 (#111)

THE ORPHAN OF CHAO (The University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.) WSSU-Dillard Auditorium, Anderson Center: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$25 (#31)

THE SPIRIT OF HARRIET TUBMAN (Li'l Ol Me Productions, Windsor Ontario Canada.) Reynolda House Museum of American Art: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$37 (#37), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$37 (#53)

THE WAITING ROOM (The Ensemble Theatre, Houston, TX.) Arts Council Theatre: Fri 8/5 3:00p.m., \$40 (#78), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$40 (#85), Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$40 (#100), Sat 8/6 8:00p.m., \$40 (#112)

THOSE SENSATIONAL SOULFUL 60's (Black Ensemble Theatre, Chicago, IL.) K. R. Williams Auditorium: Thurs 8/4 8:00p.m., \$44 (#64), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$44 (#86) Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$44 (#101), Sat 8/6 8:00 p.m., \$44 (#113)

THREE SISTAS (Black Theatre Troupe, Phoenix, AZ.) UNCSA #1 – The Thrust: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m., \$37 (#34), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$37 (#47), Thurs 8/4 3:00p.m., \$37 (#59)

TRANSITIONS (Robey Theatre Company, Los Angeles, CA.) Wake Forest #1 – The MainStage Theatre: Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$37 (#88), Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$37 (#103), Sat 8/6 8:00p.m., \$37 (#115)

TWO OLD BLACK GUYS JUST SITTING AROUND TALKING (Penumbra Theatre Company, St. Paul, MN.) UNCSA #2 – The Catawba: Fri 8/5 3:00p.m., \$37 (#81), Fri 8/5 8:00p.m., \$37 (#91), Sat 8/6 3:00p.m., \$37 (#106), Sat 8/6 8:00p.m., \$37 (#118)

UN-RINGING THE BELL (Amador Productions, Los Angeles, CA.) Wake Forest #1 – The MainStage Theatre: Wed 8/3 3:00p.m. \$40 (#32), Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$40 (#45) Thurs 8/4 8:00p.m., \$40 (#66)

VOICES OF HAITI: A POST-QUAKE ODYSSEY IN VERSE (Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Washington, DC.) Old Salem Visitor Center – Gray Auditorium: Wed 8/3 8:00p.m., \$25 (#52)