

Woodie King Jr., a Mighty Legend

Condolences and Reflections from Dr. Brenda M. Greene

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Woodie King Jr., the founder of the **New Federal Theatre** in 1970, the theatrical and film actor, writer, producer, and director of over 400 performances, and the founder of the National Black Touring Circuit, made his transition on January 29, 2026. King was a pioneer, a Renaissance man who passionately pursued his mission to support Black actors and writers by producing and directing their work, providing performance spaces, and integrating and raising their profile in mainstream theater. King has received many awards and was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame and received a Tony Honors for Excellence in Theater.

The number of actors and writers King worked with is extensive. They are luminaries in theater, film, and literature and include artists such as Debbie Allen, Chadwick Boseman, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Laurence Fishburne, Morgan Freeman, Samuel L. Jackson, Phylicia Rashad, Denzel Washington, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Wesley Brown, Ntozake Shange, and Richard Wesley, among others.

King acknowledged that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) played a pivotal role in founding the New Federal Theatre. As someone who grew up during BAM, I was intentional about attending plays and supporting independent Black theatrical companies such as the New Federal Theatre, the Negro Ensemble Company, the National Black Theatre, and the New Lafayette Theatre. I fondly remember attending Woodie King Jr.'s production of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have committed suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, and J.E. Franklin's *Black Girl*. These memories of King, whom I called the *Mayor of Black Theater in NYC*, were part of the motivation for ensuring that the Center for Black Literature had a connection with him and his work.

The Center for Black Literature honored Woodie King with a **National Black Writers Conference Institutional Leadership Award** at the 13th **National Black Writers Conference: Writing Race, Embracing Difference**, and he was a featured speaker at the opening program for the 15th **National Black Writers Conference: Activism, Identity, and Race: Playwrights and Screenwriters at the Crossroads**.

In February 2023, the Center for Black Literature, in collaboration with the Black History Month Program at Medgar Evers College, hosted '**Black Cinematic History: The Political and Social Impact of the Films of Woodie King, Jr.**' The program centered on the legendary filmmaker while exploring three of his films that remain timeless staples in the annals of film and in society. See <https://ourtimepress.com/the-enduring-vision-of-woodie-king-jr/> King donated

these three engaging films to the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College. Currently housed in the **Charles Evans Inniss Memorial Library** and available for viewing by students, faculty, staff, and the general public, they explore various aspects of the complex experiences and challenges faced by Blacks from World War II to the early 1980s. ***The Torture of Mothers: The Case of The Harlem Six (1980)***, starring Ruby Dee, Clarice Taylor, and Novella Nelson is a powerful close-up of police brutality and the power dynamics of 1960s Harlem; ***Death of a Prophet (1981)***, the story of the last twenty-four hours of Malcolm X, who was assassinated after breaking off from the Nation of Islam, stars Morgan Freeman as Malcolm X, and Yolanda King (daughter of Martin Luther King Jr.) as Betty Shabazz; and ***Segregating the "Greatest" Generation (2006)***, a documentary, explores the difficulties of being Black and of being artists during and after World War II.

On a more personal note, a highlight of my connection with Woodie King Jr. was when I had the privilege of serving as a talkback leader for several of his inspiring and rich literary and theatrical productions. These included Laurence Holder's ***Zora Neale Hurston: A Theatrical Biography***, Amiri Baraka's final play, ***The Most Dangerous Man in America (W.E.B. DuBois)***, and Wesley Brown's ***Telling Tales Out of School***.

Woodie King Jr. is now with the ancestors. He lived a rich and fulfilling life and gave us a path for how we persevere and remain committed to living a purpose-driven life. In 2020, King appointed Elizabeth Van Dyke Artistic Director of the New Federal Theatre. Let us support her and the New Federal Theatre and ensure that the legacy of Woodie King Jr, her husband, is sustained.