



*A Tribute to*  
**WOODIE KING, JR**

by **Gary Anderson**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Theatre,

It is with a VERY heavy heart that I write you with the news that Woodie King, Jr. has transitioned. We've lost a truly significant artist. Born in Mobile, Alabama, but raised in Detroit, Michigan, Woodie was a signature example of a generation of Black creatives who changed the complexion of the American Theatre, not because we were invited to the table, but because they built a new table, invited all of their friends, and brought their own chair.

Whether we realize it or not, Woodie is one of the strongest pillars on which each of us has built our careers. His long tenure repeatedly made the case for a fierce and fearless Black Theatre. He endured being underestimated and dismissed by many of his peers running white theaters at the time. But Woodie was from Detroit, and he didn't a fuck what others thought of him. He proceeded with the work he came to do.

Highlighting the talents of other Black artists and creatives before they became famous was his forte. Playwrights connected to Woodie and New Federal Theatre (NFT), his company, include J. E. Franklin, Ed Bullins, Charles Fuller, Ntozake Shange, Pearl Cleage, and his lifelong friend Ron Milner. The actors include Morgan Freeman, Debbie Allen, Samuel L. Jackson, Laurence Fishburne, Chadwick Boseman, Lynn Whitfield, S. Epatha Merkerson, Phyllicia Rashad, Denzel Washington, and so many more.

Woodie's steadfast dedication to authentically representing Black life is significant because NFT has produced more than 450 plays, programs, and opportunities. His professional touring venture, The National Black Touring Circuit, brought those plays across the nation at a time when many Black communities lacked a local representative theater. He helped reflect our lives, aspirations, and perspectives back to us, validating Black Thought in a way that sparked pride and confidence in many of us. Like a tiller of the field, he seeded the ground in New Brunswick, Winston-Salem, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Oakland, Memphis, and his beloved Detroit, inspiring the stages that exist there.

He directed the 1978 documentary, *Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*, which chronicles Black Theatre during the Civil Rights era. Woodie's film features interviews with Shauneille Perry, Ossie Davis, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, James Earl Jones, and Lloyd Richards, showcasing the rise of politically engaged Black artistic expression that emerged during the 1960s and 70s.

A full list of the Black artists he has spotlighted is far longer than I can document at this moment. The same applies to his list of professional achievements. Our cultural lives, and the very nature of Black Theatre today, owe a great debt to Woodie

In closing, I can say with complete confidence that anything I have achieved or will achieve in the years I have left is due to the kindness he extended to a brash, arrogant young man he met by chance in Atlanta in 1990, the same year I started Plowshares. Woodie became my mentor, my friend, my advocate, my father. I will mark his passing on the road. His name will not go silent as long as I have breath in my body.

