

Johnny Lee Davenport came to Boston in 2006, when he was invited to play Claudius in the Actors' Shakespeare Project of Hamlet. Upon arrival, he sensed the Boston theatre community was thriving, growing, and embracing diversity in the same way that his home base Chicago had in the 1980's and 1990's. While walking through Boston Common on a beautiful fall afternoon and stopping to listen to musicians, he made the decision to stay.

Since that time, he performed or did staged readings for nearly every other area theatre including Commonwealth Shakespeare, New Rep, Trinity Rep, Huntington Theatre, Company One, Lyric Stage Company, Gloucester Stage Company, Wheelock Family Theatre, Stoneham Theatre, The Poets' Theatre, Speakeasy Stage, Central Square Theater (Front Porch Arts Collective and Underground Railway Theater), Wellfleet Harbor Actors' Theater, and Boston Playwrights' Theatre.

Davenport's acting career began as a teenager. From the time he was cast in the role of Jaquot in the musical Carnival at West Aurora High School, he recognized and was driven by the power of theatre. When asked why he became an actor, he'd say, "It wasn't a choice." When asked about his favorite role, he'd say, "The one I'm playing now." By the end of his career, he had appeared in more than 200 professional productions throughout the United States, Canada, Greece, and Ireland.

On his way to becoming a member of the Actors' Equity Association, Davenport majored in Theatre Arts at Southern Illinois University, where he launched the first African American Theatre Group, The Kutana Players, a black theatre group, still in existence and now known as the Unity Theatre Ensemble.

Upon college graduation, Johnny was drafted to serve in the U.S. Army and fought in the Vietnam War. While stationed at Fort Campbell, he founded a theatre troupe called Ebonessence, which included enlisted service members, their family members, and people from surrounding communities, and emphasized black art.

Once he was discharged from the Army, Davenport began performing in Chicago. His contemporaries say his most iconic roles were Harold Loomis in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Goodman Theatre), Lucifer in *The Mystery Cycle* (Court Theatre), and *Everyman* (Steppenwolf Theatre) in which one of four actors was selected randomly to play Everyman at different performances.

The focus of his stage career became more specific when, in 1988, he was selected to represent The Chicago Associates of the Stratford Festival of Canada and joined the Young Company, performing in *King Lear*, *Oedipus*, *The Critic*, and *Twelfth Night*. Upon his return to Chicago, Barbara Gaines cast him as Jupiter in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's *The Tale of Cymbeline* and her productions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Shakespeare's Greatest Hits*.

Together, these experiences ignited his passion for classical theatre, and as a result, he began "chasing Shakespeare." In 1989, he trained at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox,

Mass., with Tina Packer and became a company member, performing in productions and staged readings from 1995 to 2018.

With a goal to perform in professional productions of Shakespeare's entire canon, Davenport embraced his peripatetic nature and traveled extensively. He was a guest artist for several Shakespeare companies, including Orlando Shakespeare Theater, Tennessee Shakespeare Company, Actors' Shakespeare Project, Commonwealth Shakespeare, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, The Shakespeare Theatre (Washington, D.C.), Milwaukee Shakespeare Company, Elm Shakespeare Company, and the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. In all, he played nearly 60 roles in 26 of Shakespeare's 39 plays.

As an artist, Johnny was committed to transforming the perpetuated assumption that classical theatre is an elitist art form. He endeavored to make classical theatre relevant and accessible to everyone, and he was developing a classical theatre training program designed for American minorities interested in acquiring the technical skills necessary to take ownership of classical material and represent classical themes and characters with a personal truth and confidence.

Beyond classical theatre, Johnny was equally interested in contributing to any powerful theatrical experience that seeks to elevate and educate.

Some of his career highlights included working with August Wilson for the Chicago premiere of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at the Goodman Theatre, being cast as Marshal Henry in Andrew Davis's Oscar-nominated film *The Fugitive*, working with Joseph Shabalala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo in Steppenwolf Theatre's production of *Nomathemba*, traveling to the Athens Festival in Greece with Washington D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company to present *The Oedipus Plays*, performing with Avery Brooks in an all-African American *King Lear*, and representing America as a guest artist on three occasions to perform as Othello and Iago for Alan Stanford's Second Age Theatre Company in Dublin.

Over the years Johnny was inspired, encouraged, and tolerated by artists such as Avery Brooks, David Chambers, Kevin Coleman, Robert Downey Jr., Harrison Ford, Barbara Gaines, Frank Galati, Jim Helsing, Tommy Lee Jones, Kristin Linklater, Dan McCleary, Tina Packer, Joe Pantoliano, Robin Phillips, Joseph Shabalala, and Dennis Zacek. This list, however, is in no way complete.

Johnny was grateful to every artist with whom he has worked, in all facets of theatre, TV, and film, for their generosity in sharing their personal light, which helped to illuminate his chosen path.

Davenport died on February 2, 2020. In his honor, a non-profit organization has been formed to realize his dream of training minorities in classical theater. Called Beyond Classical Theatre, the non-profit "honors the legacy of Johnny Lee Davenport by giving actors of color, with a specific passion for classical theater, opportunities to prepare for excellence in the performance of classical theater and to become role models and teachers for other actors of color who share this same passion. Beyond Classical Theatre offers

grants, determined and developed annually by its board, to foster these opportunities.” To that end, a gofundme campaign is underway. The organization’s website is beyondclassicaltheatre.org.

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Elliot Norton Awards

- Outstanding Actor, Midsize Theatre, Broke-ology, Lyric Stage, 2011

IRNE Awards

- Best Actor, Medium Size Theatre, Driving Miss Daisy, Gloucester Stage, 2014
- Best Play, Mid-size Company, Master Harold . . . and the boys, Gloucester Stage, 2013

Broadayworld Awards

- Best Actor in a Play - Medium Theatre: Broke-ology, Lyric Stage in 2011
- Best Actor in a Play - Small/Fringe Theatre: Neighbors Company One in 2011

Boston Magazine

- The magazine gave an acting award for a couple years and Johnny received Best Actor in Boston for 2011.

Helen Hayes Awards

- Outstanding Ensemble, Resident Play for Invisible Man, Studio Theatre, Washington, D.C., 2013 (the play was co-produced with the Huntington Theatre and later traveled to Boston)

Joseph Jefferson Awards

- Best Play, The Tale of Cymbeline, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre 1989 (played Jupiter/Storyteller)
- JEFF Citation Wing Recommendation for his performance as Walter Lee in A Raisin in the Sun, Chicago City Theatre, 1979

Southern Illinois University

- Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role, The Great White Hope, 1971