

By Angye Morrison
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Local theater legend and former Georgia Southern University professor Mical Whitaker isn't caught off guard much. But Sunday, following a performance as Al Lewis in "The Sunshine Boys" alongside Eddie Frazier's Willie Clark, Whitaker was completely taken by surprise. Whitaker, who also turned 80 on Sunday, was presented the distinction of 2021 Averitt Center Legend of the Arts by Ressie Fuller, who co-directed "The Sunshine Boys" with Carol Thompson. The Legends are local artists who have made a substantial contribution to the arts in the area. Past legends include Emma Kelly, Michael Braz, Roxie Remley, Blind Willie McTell, Delma Presley and Betty Foy Sanders.

On Monday morning, Whitaker talked about the "trifecta" — turning 80, doing a favorite show he's wanted to do for years with a stellar cast and then being named a Legend. "It knocked me off my feet," he said. "I'm still kind of wobbly."

Whitaker had no idea the surprise was coming, although he'd been talking with long-distance friends and wondering why they had been cutting conversations short. He knows now that they didn't want to give anything away. He called the whole thing a "magnificently conspiratorial event."

As for being called a Legend, Whitaker says it's an incredible feeling. "It's hard to say how I feel, because there is no preparation for this. I didn't expect it. I don't think I ever thought about it happening. Things like this happen to other people. When it happens to you, you think, I must be dreaming. I can't take the smile off my face. I keep grinning," he said. "I looked in the mirror this morning and I was just grinning."

Humble beginnings

A native of Metter, Whitaker attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he was cast in his first production in his freshman year. That performance gave birth to a hunger for the stage, and he soon made his way to New York City to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He spent the next 20 years doing everything from street performance to international festivals. He developed his own theater company, The East River Players, during the 1960s and 70s, which became one of the city's most influential African-American voices. He also founded the Everyman Street Theater Company, and developed the Everyman Street Theater Festival in the early 1970s, still in operation today under the moniker of the Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and is an annual celebration of live theater.

Whitaker's work in African-American theater has been recognized with two Fulbright fellowships: in 1991 to Duke University and in 1992 to the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania, East Africa. He was inducted into the Georgia Theatre Hall of Fame in 2013, an experience that Whitaker said was, "beyond anything I've ever worked for."

Mical Whitaker is moved by the numerous tributes during his surprise induction as an Averitt Center for the Arts Legend on his 80th birthday following his performance in "The Sunshine Boys" on Saturday, Feb. 14. - photo by By SCOTT BRYANT/staff

In 1981, Whitaker returned to Georgia, taking a teaching position at Georgia Southern and becoming the theater program's first African-American instructor. During his tenure, he acted in more than 100 theater productions and was instrumental in bringing black theater to campus.

His legacy at GSU was honored with the Mical Whitaker Scholarship, established in 2014, in recognition of his impact on African-American theater, and is available to students interested in studying it.

Whitaker retired as Professor Emeritus in 2005, but he hasn't remained backstage. In fact, Whitaker has performed in or directed dozens of plays, including playing the role of Hoke in "Driving Miss Daisy," which he revisited for the second time in 2019 on the production's 10-year anniversary. He won the Averitt's very first Emma Award for Best Director for Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie."

Honoring Whitaker

During Sunday afternoon's surprise unveiling of Whitaker as the newest Legend, cast members from the show read letters from friends near and far, all of whom expressed their love and appreciation for Whitaker.

"Knowing you as an artist, I cannot wait for your next project. I know you just get better with time, and I am just excited to be there to support you as your colleague, co-star, director and friend," wrote Thompson, who has starred alongside Whitaker in "Driving Miss Daisy" and "The Gin Game."

Charles Floyd Johnson, who attended Howard University with Whitaker, wrote of his "innate kindness and generosity, and sterling humanity," adding that when they met, he knew that Whitaker was "certainly destined to go far and achieve great things."

Whitaker was overwhelmed with emotion as the letters were read. He said he found himself wishing that his parents could have been there, along with "Big Mom," Mabel Whitaker, who raised him in New Jersey.

"What would she think?" he said. "What was going through my mind was that here I was at 80 years old, doing exactly what I hoped I would be doing if I ever lived to be 80. When you literally have a dream come true, right in your face, you know, you experience God at that moment, like no other, I think, because you didn't plan it."

Fuller said she doesn't know if she can explain how important Whitaker is. She moved to Statesboro almost 10-and-a-half years ago after retiring from nearly 40 years as an attorney. "I came here to rest and to spoil my grandchild, and I met Mical Whitaker. And he opened up a whole new world, because he tapped something in me that I didn't even know was there. I think that is the important thing about Mical Whitaker," she said. "He knows how to tap potential. If we could tap just 10% of what we're not using because of fear or whatever...he has the ability to tap into that, which makes him almost like a guru, like a magical figure that goes around tapping people's talent."

Fuller calls Whitaker "a wonderful friend, wonderful mentor, wonderful teacher." "But I think the best part of him is that magic man thing he has going on. It's almost like he sprinkles pixie dust," she said, laughing.

A deserving 'Legend'

Fuller, who is the chair of the Legend committee at the Averitt Center, said that Whitaker was on their radar for a long time, because he's been so important to the local arts community. "It's not rocket science to select him because of all that he has done, with this community, with Georgia Southern. He's just been phenomenal," she said. Thompson couldn't agree more.

"He has been a legend in the arts long before this award was given," she said. "Between his work in New York, the Georgia Hall of Fame, his work at Georgia Southern, and creating and bringing the first African-American work to Georgia Southern with 'Amen Corner,' he's just been a legend in the arts," she said, adding that she had long advocated for him to be named a Legend of the Arts.

Thompson and Whitaker met in the late 1990s, while Thompson was director of Campus Life Enrichment at GSU. He was awarded a CLEC grant to bring Johnson in to do classes with his students, and Thompson was able to work with them through that project. Years later, Johnson came back to direct Whitaker and Thompson in "The Gin Game," something she calls an amazing experience.

Thompson says she knew she'd met someone special, right from the start. "Mical and I just connected up front. When I met him, I thought, oh my God, this is a kindred artist that I'm working with, and I can't wait to see all that he does," she said. Their friendship has grown, and Thompson said she admires his generosity, and his ability to bring out the best in others.

“The thing about working with him as a director and even a costar is that he brings out these little minutia points of your character that makes your character so real and alive. He creates in you this safety zone that allows you to be vulnerable on stage, which is a depth you don’t get from a lot of directors. He goes to the inside of that character and brings it out of you, and that’s what makes you come alive on stage,” she said.