

“My World is the Stage”

James M. Brown enjoying a fruitful acting career in retirement

By Anita Oubre

Retirement has brought many surprises to James Marshall Brown III, including a new career. He has found his niche in this stage of his life by appearing in commercials, film and stage plays.

At almost 70, James finds it humorous when his family members tell him they see him more on television than in person. James is recognized in many local commercials for products such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Popeyes, Blue Runner and Morris Bart legal services.

Describing a career that is continually growing and offering new, exciting challenges, he says, “My world is the stage.”

Born and raised in New Orleans, James grew up in the Lower 9th Ward. He attended both Redeemer and Lawless, and was one of the first African Americans

to integrate Francis T. Nichols High School. He was taught life lessons early from his parents, Joyce Veal Brown and James Brown Jr. They instilled in him the important things in life: education, securing a nice home and raising a family.

James studied at both Southern University at New Orleans and the University of New Orleans where he was involved with acting for a brief stint in the 1970s during the filming of “Mandingo” with Ken Norton. He worked full time while attending classes and then decided to give up the classroom for the boardroom.

COVER STORY

James entered the corporate world that included lots of travel and working his way up to management positions in retail, as well as with Federal Express.

James met the love of his life, Jacqueline Madison Brown, with whom he has been married 43 years. Together they raised their two children, Brittney and James IV.

It was after returning home from evacuating after Hurricane Katrina that James was reintroduced to acting. "The city was buzzing with the excitement of Hollywood South and a friend of mine turned me on to the idea of making movies," said James.

At the time, while James was rebuilding his home and his kids were in college, it turned out to be a good fit and something

for him to do in between his other responsibilities. He secured some background work in TNT's "K-ville" series starring Anthony Anderson.

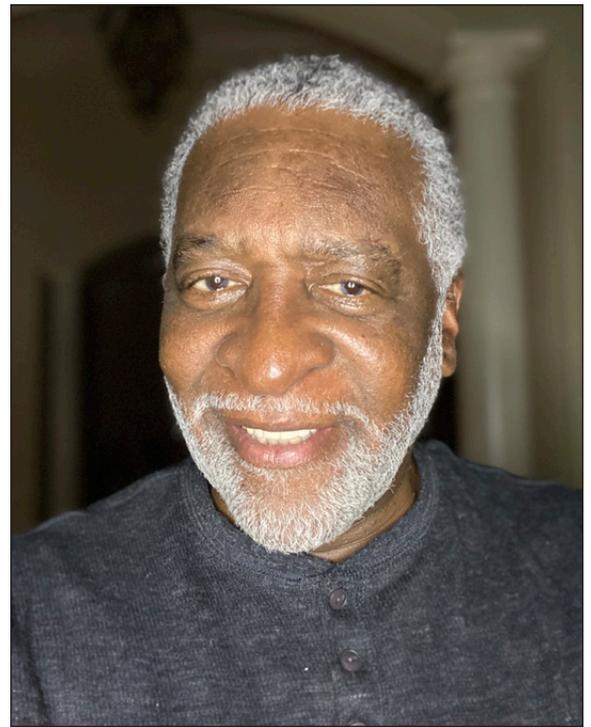
"I enjoyed that so much," he said. "The cast was incredible, the experience was awesome, they fed us good, and it was something positive for me to do in between working with contractors and rebuilding." He added that "It was a great experience" until the writer's strike happened and the series came to a standstill.

By then James had been thoroughly bitten by the acting bug and, through the advice of a friend, he decided to meet with local director Anthony Bean of the acclaimed Anthony Bean Community

Theatre. James read for Charles Fuller's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "A Soldier's Story," and was cast in the role of Private Wilkie. "I ended up forming a great relationship with Anthony. I credit him for me taking the craft seriously and taking it to the next level," said James.

From there the next big assignment was "The Oliver Thomas Story" where James played New Orleans City Councilman Jim Singleton. "The play was a hit," James said. "It was local politics and people thought they were going to find out something controversial. So many people came that the fire marshals threatened to shut us down."

It was shortly thereafter James signed



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JAMES M. BROWN

Scenes from commercials

on with an agent who had attended one of the performances. He had graduated from extra and background classifications to featured roles and auditions. This meant he was Screen Actors Guild (SAG) eligible. This was a huge step up for James and his career, not only because it was a rite of passage for an actor, but it also meant he was eligible for medical benefits and union protection. It was also an assurance that he would be paid properly for his work. James has been a member of the union since 2009.

He credits many local actors for their encouragement over the years, as well as their expertise. He cites such luminaries as Harold X. Evans, Gwendolyn Foxworth, Wilbert Williams Jr and the late Carol Sutton.

James laughed as he recalled a conversation with his friend Carol. “She asked me how I get cast for so many commercials. Here she is with an Emmy and up for all these awards and she’s asking about my commercials.”

James says that his entire life has been preparation for the roles that he goes after. “I’ve always had the gift of gab and have picked up and learned something from everyone I have encountered in my years,” he said.

As he prepares for each role, he looks into the treasure chest of people he has met for inspiration. He says he studies people and is able to use those

personalities when the time is right. “Everyone has a story, whether you are an alcoholic or have spent time in Angola, you can learn something from each situation or person,” said James. “Everybody is somebody.”

James advises younger people just starting out in the industry to learn from every encounter and situation. “It’s all a learning experience,” he noted. “I may not get a part because they are looking for a certain look, height or age but I may get something else. I started as an extra and then was invited to read. Take what they give you. It may not be much but it may lead to something else.”

He also stresses preparedness and being on time. He reminds actors to stay humble, listen and don’t frown on taking advice. He recalled taking a five-hour road trip to audition for the movie “The Help.” He didn’t get the part but he said it was a learning experience for him. “They had hoped to use Morgan Freeman for a cameo appearance for the part I read for but, regardless, I had a great day trip with my wife driving to the location,” James recalled.

James is most proud to pass this good



James M. Brown, Richard Roundtree, Anthony Bean

advice on to his granddaughters, Madison and Trinity. He enjoys bringing them on sets and spending quality time with them as they are following in his footsteps as young actresses. “I have the pleasure of teaching them the etiquette of the business and they gain a lot of confidence that they can use in the classroom,” he said.

During his retirement James keeps busy, not only providing transportation and lessons for his granddaughters, but also preparing for his upcoming auditions. On the week of this interview he was constructing three different auditions. With the pandemic still a factor, auditions now take place through video and Zoom. James takes it all in stride and he has perfected lighting and video techniques to be sure he presents a good visual impression. He uses Vaseline to soften the

wrinkles in his forehead and around his eyes and takes other measures to polish his physical appearance.

“I study my character,” he emphatically concludes. “I give my character a voice and I become my character. I’m not afraid to roll up my sleeves to get the job done.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JAMES M. BROWN



Scenes from movies

