



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACKSON BEALS

“HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED”

Lance E. Nichols to Perform August Wilson One-Man Show at Le Petit

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

It's been 11 years since New Orleans native actor Lance E. Nichols graced the cover of Breakthru Media magazine's March/April 2012 issue and, as he put it, “A whole lot of water has gone under the bridge since then.”

In the early part of 2012 the HBO series, “Treme,” was in its award-winning heyday and Lance was playing a key role in the action on screen. Since then he has appeared in well over 100 films, TV movies, television series, documentaries, shorts and other visual media, according to the most recent Internet Media Database (IMDb) listings.

Lance’s acting career has now come full-circle with his self-described “first love”: live theater. He will be performing a one-man show recounting the life of the renowned, Pulitzer Prize-winning African American playwright, August Wilson (1945-2005), at Le Petit Theatre. The play, titled “How I Learned What I Learned” will run from April 20 through May 7.

Written by Wilson and initially performed by him, the work is described as “a poetic one-man autobiographical show journeying through love, adversity and self-discovery in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he grew up. It is a stunning self-portrait of one of the strongest voices in the American theatre.”

Interviewed by phone from Portland, Maine where he is staging over 20 performances of the piece, Lance said, “It’s going to be great to be back in my hometown



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performing live in front of my family and my many friends here. August Wilson is one of my favorite playwrights.

“I’ve been in two of his pieces,” Lance continued, noting that they were “The Piano Lesson” and “King Hedley II,” both of which are from Wilson’s “Pittsburgh Cycle” of 10 plays documenting African American life throughout the decades of the 20th century.

Ironically, the show in which Lance was performing when the pandemic hit was “The Piano Lesson” at Le Petit in the spring of 2020. It opened for one week to full houses and the following week it was forced to shut down closed because of the COVID pandemic.

Commenting on the literary artistry of Wilson’s style, Lance said, “The really good thing about his pieces is that his writing is so rich and colorful. It’s filled with pathos and humor and reality. There will be some things in the piece I’m doing here that I think will be strictly

germane to African American people that White audiences might not understand. But there’s also a lot of things in the script that will be germane to just about everybody: human experiences, not just African American experiences.

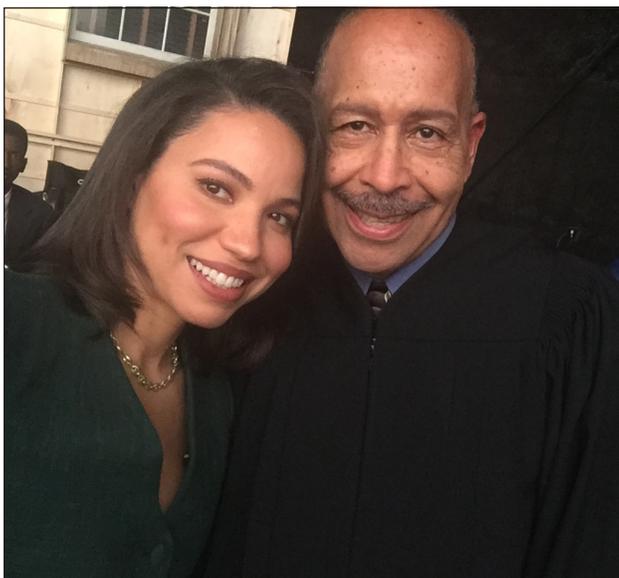
“So I’m excited to be doing this,” he continued. “I felt like I was getting bored with a lot of the opportunities that were coming my way as far as film and TV work were concerned. I never want to feel like I’m getting stale. I want to always feel like I’m being challenged and this is absolutely that challenge.”

“That challenge” Lance spoke of is a 42-page script that has to be committed to memory. “It’s difficult,” he said. However, he is confident that, after performing it more than 20 times in Maine, it will be easier when he performs it in New Orleans.

Over the 11 years since his previous story in the magazine, Lance has appeared in productions with such stars as Jamie Foxx, Martin Lawrence, Tommie Lee Jones, Brad Pitt, Lynn Whitfield, Jurnee Smollett and others. He went on to summarize some of the more memorable roles he performed during that time period.

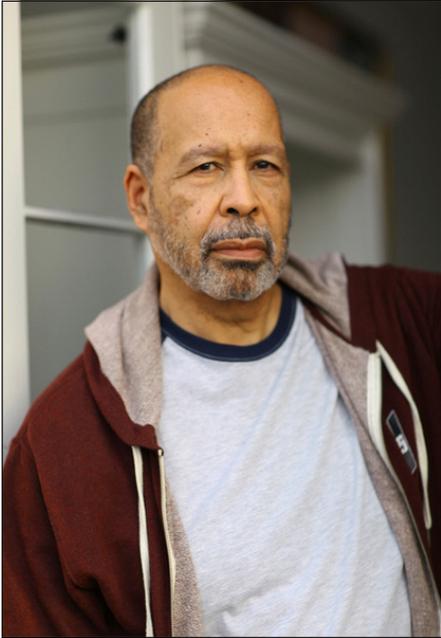
One of them was an AMC (American Movie Classics) series called “Into the

PHOTO COURTESY OF LANCE E. NICHOLS



Lance and Jurnee Smollett on the set of the Amazon film *THE BURIAL*. Also starring Tommy Lee Jones

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Badlands” which was filmed in New Orleans during its first season. Lance was cast as a main character called The River King and he did two episodes, and then they moved the show to Dublin, Ireland. He didn’t appear in Season 2 but in Season 3 they brought him back to wrap up his story line and he spent two months in Dublin. His character ends up getting impaled to death.

“It was a really great opportunity for me and it was an interesting character because, if you see how they had me dressed, you might say, ‘If Jimi Hendrix was alive today this is what he would look like,’” Lance added.

Another memorable recent role for Lance was in a show for the USA network titled “Queen of the South,” the story of a woman who was the top drug lord in Mexico. He was on that show for seasons 3 and 4, playing a character named Lucien.

“I played a guy who’d been in the drug trafficking game a long time and now he’s mentoring a younger guy,” Lance explained. “He stayed

in the game a little too long and tries to double cross the head person and it ends up costing him his life.

“It’s so weird because that character and the character I played in ‘Into the Badlands’ were both conniving and manipulating and they both end up getting offed,” Lance said. “So there was a period when my wife was saying to me, ‘What’s with you getting cast in these characters where they kill you off?’ he added with a laugh.

Lance spoke with pride about his wife, Zardis Nichols, a singer who was featured in the September/October 2018 issue of Breakthru Media magazine. “She’s doing well,” he said. He co-produced three live shows for her at the Jazz Market between 2016 and 2019. “All three were very successful. She had plans to do one in 2020 but the pandemic hit,” he said.

A role for Zardis as a character in an all-Black version of a popular stage play is being discussed but details can’t be divulged at this time, Lance explained.

One of Lance and Zardis’ three daughters, Alyssa Ashley Nichols, who went by the stage name of Indigo and had roles

in several made-for-TV productions – including “Treme” – is now retired and living in Costa Rica with her husband. Their middle daughter, Voice, has two sons, 20 and 16 and their oldest daughter, Kiki, who lives in Los Angeles has a son and a daughter ages 31 and 25 respectively. The daughter has four-year-old twin sons.

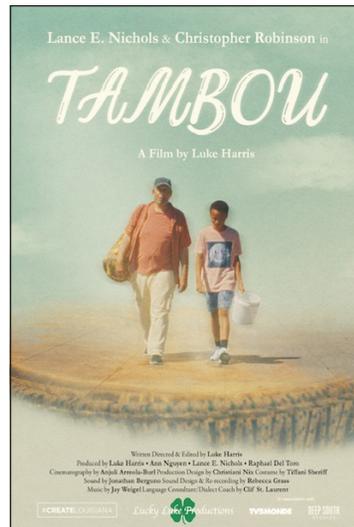
“So now I’m a great-grandpa and I’m not even 70 yet,” Lance said.

And so, as Lance’s acting career goes on, he is looking forward to several new releases which are in various stages of production. Over a period spanning more than 40 years, as he put it, “I’ve had a great career with some great roles. I’ve met some wonderful people, I’ve learned a lot and I’m looking forward to more good things coming my way.”

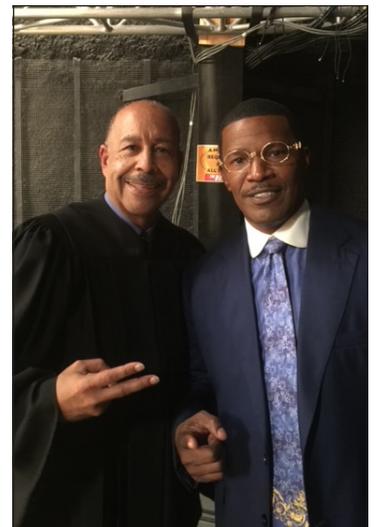
Concluding with his praise for August Wilson, Lance said, “It’s an honor for me to portray him. Anytime you get to live this man’s words it’s a huge honor. This is not a play he wrote with characters: this is him telling his story and I’m blessed to be up on stage telling it.”



Lance and Martin Lawrence on the set of the limited series DAMASCUS



Short film TAMBOU. Premiering at the French Film Festival March 11 at the Prytania Theater



Lance and Jamie Foxx on the set of the Amazon film THE BURIAL. Also starring Tommy Lee Jones

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LANCE E. NICHOLS

Tickets for August Wilson’s “How I Learned What I Learned,” featuring Lance E. Nichols, can be purchased at the theatre box office located at 616 St. Peter Street in the French Quarter or ordered online at www.lepetittheatre.com. For more show times and other information email boxoffice@lepetittheatre.com or call (504) 522-2081.