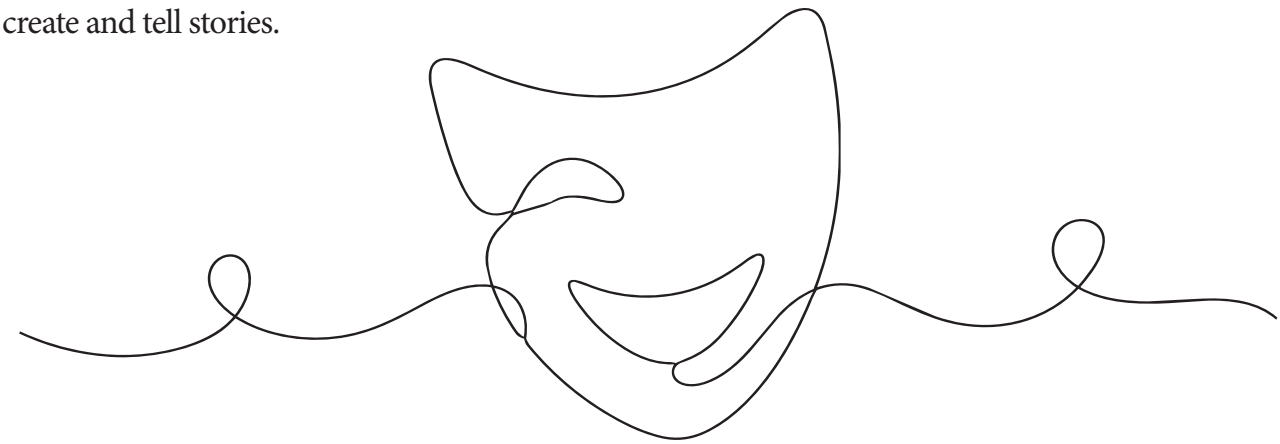


PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH BROWN, JR.

Kenneth Brown Jr.: Finds His Way Back to the Stage

By Kimmie Tubre

Some journeys take a few unexpected turns before leading us exactly where we are supposed to be. For New Orleans native Kenneth Brown Jr., the road to acting was anything but traditional. It included military service, martial arts competitions, music, a cross-country move to Hollywood and a determination to learn the art of filmmaking. But through every chapter, one thing remained constant: his desire to create and tell stories.





Ganking Mr Guidry cast: Kenneth Brown Jr., Martin "Bats" Bradford, Nicole Collins, Rahim Glaspy, and Al Aubry. PHOTO BY AB SYKES PHOTOGRAPHY

After spending years building a career in film and television, Brown recently returned to the stage in Harold Ellis Clark's *Ganking Mr. Guidry*. The production, which premiered at Le Petit Theatre in August 2026, marked his first full stage production in a decade. More than another acting credit, it was a meaningful homecoming for a performer whose journey has taken him from local theater to Hollywood and back to the city that started it all.

Born and raised in New Orleans, Brown spent much of his childhood between Algiers and Gretna. "I'm an only child, so I was pretty spoiled by my grandmother and learned early how to entertain myself."

His father, who was an organist and choir director at Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church in Algiers, introduced him to music and helped nurture his creative side. At just eight years old, Brown received a keyboard for Christmas. His father's instructions were simple: teach yourself.

That independent spirit followed him to St. Augustine High School, where he graduated in 1997. A member of the Purple Knights' marching band, Brown initially played trombone before finally getting the opportunity to play the instrument he had admired since childhood: the tuba. "My mother was not thrilled when I brought home the oversized instrument, but for me, it was a dream come true."

Music was only one of his interests. Brown also studied martial arts, beginning in elementary school after his mother enrolled him in classes to help him defend himself against bullies. "I earned a first-degree black belt, taught myself to use four martial arts weapons and competed as a member of the U.S. martial arts team in Jamaica, earning trophies in all four weapons."

After attending Grambling State University, Brown entered military service with the Air National Guard, where he served for 12 years. Ironically, it was during one of the most difficult periods in New Orleans history that he discovered his calling as an actor.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Brown's military unit was assigned to patrol city streets in Humvees. While traveling along South Carrollton Avenue, he spotted a sign for Anthony Bean Community Theater. Something about it caught his attention.

"The Lord literally gave me a sign," Brown recalled.

At about 25, with no previous acting experience, he decided to give theater a try. His first experience was not exactly a Hollywood success story. Cast in August Wilson's "Joe Turner Come and Gone," Brown admits he did not initially understand the level of commitment required. After missing a Saturday rehearsal because he had stayed out too late the night before, he was fired. Anthony Bean, however, gave him an opportunity to work backstage before earning his way back onto the stage.

Brown took the lesson seriously. His next production was another August Wilson classic, "Fences," in which he portrayed Lyons Maxson. He followed that with "The Old Settler," where he played the only male lead. He also connected with acting coach Lance E. Nichols, whose scholarship program helped provide additional training and open doors to professional opportunities.

Over the next several years, Brown built an impressive résumé, appearing in more than two dozen film and television productions. His credits include "Green Lantern," "Battle: Los Angeles," "Seeking Justice" and "Looper," along with appearances in "Treme" and "NCIS: New Orleans." He also had opportunities to share the screen with notable performers, including Taraji P. Henson, Forest Whitaker, Nicolas Cage and the late Robin Williams.

But Brown wanted more than a place in someone else's production. "I wanted to understand how films were made and

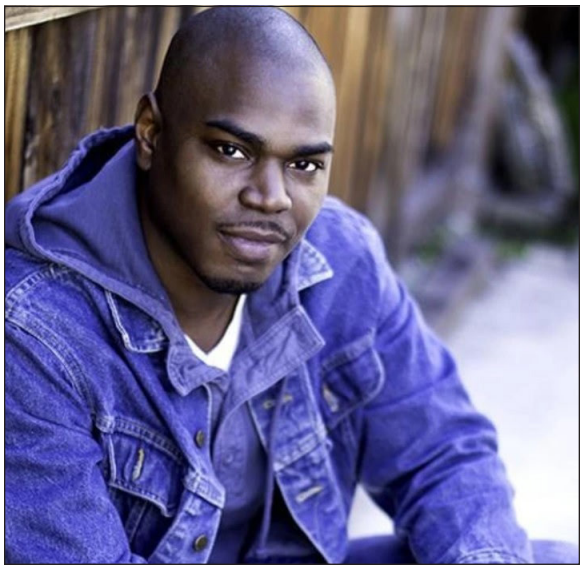


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create opportunities of my own."

That ambition led him to Los Angeles in 2009 and to the New York Film Academy's filmmaking program. He graduated from the filmmaking program in 2013 and completed an additional yearlong screenwriting program in 2014.

Although he spent several years in Los Angeles, New Orleans was always home. When I returned I had a bigger vision…I wanted to create projects in my hometown and help open doors for other local creatives."

Inspired in part by filmmaker and entrepreneur Tyler Perry, Brown recognized



the importance of building opportunities rather than waiting for someone else to provide them.

His work behind the camera includes Stay at Home, a psychological horror short film he created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown wrote, directed, produced, filmed, edited and starred in the one-man project, which also carried a message encouraging African American communities to take the pandemic seriously. The film eventually caught the attention of NPR, which interviewed him about his work.

Still, acting remains an important part of Brown's creative identity. And that brings us to his latest theatrical chapter.

When director John Grimsley called and asked Brown to join the cast of *Ganking Mr. Guidry,* there was little hesitation. Grimsley was someone Brown trusted, and although Brown had not performed in a full stage production in 10 years, he made himself ready to return.

"If anybody can get me on stage, it's going to be John Grimsley," Brown said.

Set during Louisiana's post-Reconstruction era, Ganking Mr. Guidry follows plantation workers navigating an oppressive system and confronting circumstances that threaten their lives. Brown portrayed a dreamer, a somewhat educated man with aspirations beyond the difficult conditions surrounding him.

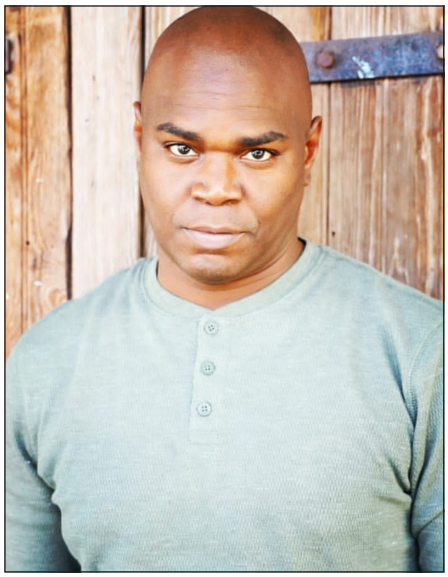
Getting back into the rhythm of live theater was not without its challenges. Brown admits that after a decade away from the stage, he sometimes questioned what he had gotten himself into. "Learning lines, and rebuilding my stage presence required patience and repetition."

But something eventually clicked. In fact, Brown recalls that the moment everything came together happened the night before opening. Still working through his lines, he was determined to show the director he was ready.

"It was like getting back on a bike," he said.

The production featured a talented ensemble, including Raheem Glaspy, Nicole Collins, Al Aubry and Martin Bradford alongside Brown. The response was tremendous, selling out every night. For an actor returning to the stage after 10 years, it was a memorable homecoming.

With such a dynamic career behind him and a bright future ahead, when asked what makes Brown most proud, he simply stated, "My growth as a filmmaker and the appreciation I have developed for the fundamentals of the craft." Having



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pursued formal education, gained experience on professional sets and taken on the challenge of creating projects independently, he understands that success is built through both talent and preparation.

Today, Brown continues to look toward the future with plans to develop original projects and create more opportunities for himself and other artists.

From Algiers to Hollywood and back to the Big Easy, Kenneth Brown Jr. has truly traveled on a path of his own.

And if there is one thing Brown's story makes clear, it is that the show is far from over.

