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Lorna C. Hill, 69, founder and Company

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Lorna C. Hill

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***J**une 25, 1951 – June 30, 2020*

"Lorna Hill may be the closest thing this city has to a theatrical diva," wrote Buffalo News reporter Jane Kwiatkowski in 2004. "As artistic director and founder of Ujima Theatre Company, she has been a vibrant and vocal force in Buffalo's arts community both on and off the stage."

Lorna C. Hill, an actor, storyteller, poet and playwright, is best known as founder and artistic director of Ujima Company, which has presented plays and about people of color for 41 years.

Ms. Hill died on June 30, five days after her 69th birthday. In early June, her family announced that after a stay at Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Ms. Hill returned home under the care of Hospice Buffalo. On June 21, a YouTube livestreamed event celebrated her legacy and contributions to the community.

Ms. Hill was lauded by Rep. Brian Higgins in an entry in the Congressional Record on June 25. In it, he said, "For her entire adult life, Ms. Hill fought for the rights of women and people of color. Ms. Hill is looked up to by many for her entrepreneurial spirit, service to Western New York, and dedication to culture, theatre and the arts."

The announcement of her death on the Ujima Facebook page prompted an outpouring of condolences.

"In her last conversation with company members, Lorna C. Hill reminded us that the one thing she wishes that we never forget," Shanntina Moore, president of the board of Ujima Company, said in a statement. "She told us that no matter what there is to come, that we should face all things by putting love and justice in front, not behind us, or beside us, but in front of us."

Ms. Hill was born in Mount Vernon, N.Y., the daughter of Curtis Mills and Lillian Byars.

"My mother was strong, and she raised me to be very strong," Ms. Hill told News in 2011. "She was significantly bigger than I am, and I assumed I would grow to her stature. She told me the creator had not given me her size because I wouldn't need it. She was right about that. No one was ever able to punk me for being 5-foot-4 and 118 pounds."

Ms. Hill grew up in West Philadelphia and studied political science at Wellesley College from 1969 to 1971, then became one of the first women admitted to Dartmouth College and the first African-American woman to graduate, in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in American Intellectual History. She moved to Buffalo in 1974 and earned a master's degree in 1978 from the University at Buffalo where she completed the coursework for a doctorate.

On Dec. 15, 1978, while she was working as assistant to the chair of the Theater Department at UB, Ms. Hill founded Ujima, a theater collective of 28 people of many races.

At Ujima – Swahili for "collective work and responsibility" – Ms. Hill was known as "the Boss." The company specialized in plays performed and written by people of color, but Ms. Hill refused to allow Ujima to be typecast as a "black only" theater, describing it as a theater that would put on anything from the classics to the avant-garde.

"We're always looking for work by and about the black community that speaks somehow to the African or the African experience," she said.

One of her first projects in Buffalo was her adaptation of a play about Malcolm X written by N.R. Davidson, based on Malcolm X's autobiography. Ms. Hill made changes and additions to the play, adding music she composed and selections from African-American music. "El Hajj Malik," as it was called, was first performed in 1980 in the Pfeifer Theatre and in 1984 and 1990 in Ujima.

Through the years, she appeared on many stages in many roles, including an award-winning portrayal of Vivian Bearing in "Wit" at the Irish Classical Theatre, in her autobiographical play "Yalla Bitch!" at Ujima, and the title role in Hag Theatre's "Lysistrata."

"Theater is part of my life," she told The News in 2011, but not all of it. "I work. I'm a single head of household. I raised two perfect children. I'm a teacher, very good teacher. I'm a healer. I'm an inspiration. I lead a community."

Besides leading, acting, producing and directing plays, Ms. Hill held other jobs. In the late 1970s, she directed "Ladies in Waiting" for the African-American Cultural Center and taught in the Studio Arena Theater School in the 1980s. From 2002 to 2006, she worked as an education specialist for the Center for Development of Human Resources in the Department of Curriculum and Education, producing training videos for the state Child Welfare/Child Protective Services Training Institute.

From 2006 to 2008, Ms. Hill produced the hourlong WNED radio show, "Uncrowned Queens: Voices of African American Women," in which she interviewed local community builders. The show received an Associated Pro

award for Best News Series and in 2009 received a Gracie Award for Mid-Length Documentary from the Alliance for Women in Media.

Ms. Hill began work in 2008 at the Buffalo Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts, where she taught theater arts, theater history and creative writing. She also directed and produced one or two stage productions each year. She retired in 2014.

Her one-woman play "Yalla Bitch!" was the only play by a Buffalo writer selected for performance during the first International Women Playwrights Conference at the University at Buffalo in 1988. Ms. Hill told The News the next year that the play is "a celebration of myself, my individuality, my universality" with women.

She starred as Lorna Dahomey in the 1987 movie "My Dark Lady," written for her by Fred A. Keller and directed by his son, Frederick King Keller.

On Sept. 4, 2009, Ms. Hill's 7-year-old grandson Asa died the day after suffering serious injuries in a car crash on the Niagara Thruway. Soon after, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

In 2014, as she prepared to star as Hecuba in "The Trojan Women" with Buffalo Public Theatre, Ms. Hill told News theater critic Colin Dabkowski, "In the past, I have to bury my 8-year-old grandson. I have to say goodbye, I have to part with him. I have to release my arms from my 8-year-old grandson. I'm careful with that."

because I want to have the best of my memory of doing that to lean on, not worst of my memory of doing that scene. I want to draw strength from my memory of doing that. I don't want to fall apart."

Ms. Hill received many honors throughout the years, including citations from Sen. Hillary Clinton, the Community Action Organization of Erie County, the Erie County Chapter of the LINKS, the YWCA and YMCA, Grassroots of Buffalo, the Buffalo Urban League, the Zonta Club, the National Organization for Women, the National Conference for Community and Justice, the Xi Epsilon Omega Chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Women for Human Rights and Dignity. In May 2011, she received the Otto Rene Castillo Award which recognizes theater companies and artists engaged in political, experimental and community-based theater.

At Dartmouth, the Black Baccalaureate was renamed the The Lorna C. Hill Graduation and Awards Celebration, in honor of her trailblazing role at the college. The recognition celebration for graduating seniors of the Black community includes a stole ceremony and initiation of graduates into the Black Alumni of Dartmouth Association.

In a statement, her family said, "Buffalo will mourn Lorna C. Hill, because her imprint cannot possibly be untangled from the best of the city itself. So rare that a bright light chooses to shine not upon herself, but instead to use her light to encourage each of us to be better – to work harder, to take care of each other."

genuinely, to give everything that we have as an offering and to feel satisfied with our good work. We know that Lorna Hill doesn't leave us, even as her body leaves this earth for another. She forever altered our spirit."

Ms. Hill is survived by her son, Amilcar Hill; daughter, Zoë Scruggs; sister, Byars; one grandchild; and a niece.

Anne Neville

Reporter
