

African American San Diego Theatre Legend Floyd Gaffney to be Honored Feb. 29 at UC San Diego

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Jan Jennings

Regarded as the father of African American theatre in San Diego, a professor emeritus in theatre and dance at the University of California, San Diego, and a man of "warm humanity" who could "make people laugh in unexpected ways," the late Floyd Gaffney will be honored at a performance celebration at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 29 in Weiss Forum Theatre on the UCSD campus. It will be preceded by a reception in the Forum Courtyard from 6 to 7 p.m. Both events are free and open to the public.

An Evening of Theatre, Music, Song and Dance will celebrate Gaffney's lifelong achievements and contributions in the arts. Theatre professor Jorge Huerta will serve as master of ceremonies. UCSD Chancellor Marye Anne Fox will give opening remarks. Among the performers will be Gaffney's daughter Monique, actor and dancer; UCSD music professor and pianist Cecil Lytle; former Gaffney student, actor James Avery; actor Karole Forman, and dancer Sandra Foster King.

"Floyd was one of the founding members of the UCSD Department of Theatre and Dance and instrumental in its march toward excellence and international recognition," says department chair, Charlie Oates. "He taught acting and movement, had a long background as a dancer and directed many productions in the department. Over the years, many of our students, even after his retirement, looked to Floyd as a mentor and advocate."

Gaffney taught at UCSD from 1971 until his retirement in 1994 and developed a reputation as a director with a keen ability to identify and nurture talent. Along the way he immersed himself in community theatre as well. He directed more than 80 productions for *Southeast Community Theatre*, San Diego's oldest African American troupe, established in 1962. Under his leadership the group was renamed *Common Ground Theatre* in 2004 to reflect its grassroots, cross-cultural mission.

"We're multiracial, and we're trying to involve people in expressing and sharing their traditions. We want to create that common ground where we all can stand together," Gaffney explained at the time of the name change.

Among his 80 productions for the community theatre group were 1990's *Fences* by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson; the 2002 AIDS drama *Before It Hits Home*; the 2005 production of Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*, featuring a 15-piece gospel choir, and the 2007 production, *Josephine Baker Tonight*.

"Floyd was truly the city's father of African American theatre," says Allan Havis, Thurgood Marshall College Provost and theatre professor who, for nearly 10 years, was Gaffney's office neighbor in Galbraith Hall and saw another side of Gaffney.

"It was clearly fun and unpredictable to be the office neighbor of Floyd," Havis says. "He tapped me frequently to proof-read a chapter of text or a grant proposal. There was always the warm, human touch, not just a colleague knocking on the door. He made me laugh in unexpected ways. To know him and his wonderful family added life to my time on campus and in the world of performance."

Gaffney was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006 as part of the KPBS Patté Awards for Theatre Excellence. He was cited for "35 inspirational years of galvanizing the community with socially relevant theatre" and "for bringing new voices to San Diego stages."

Gaffney was born June 11, 1930 in Cleveland and became involved in theatre at Karamu House, a socially aware organization that attracted African-American artists. Prior to enrolling in college, he pursued a career as a dancer. He received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in theatre at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y., and a doctorate in drama at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Prior to coming to UCSD he taught at Clark College in Atlanta, Ga., Ohio University in Athens, and UC Santa Barbara. Gaffney died July 19, 2007.

"Significantly for our faculty and students, Floyd was a pioneer in the African American theatre nationally and for decades, its leading artist in San Diego," says Oates.

"His stage direction at many venues around town over the decades enriched all of San Diego," Havis adds.

The Gaffney tribute concludes UCSD's Black History Month Celebration whose February theme has been *UCSD Honors Black History Month: Rethinking American Identity*.

For further information on the Gaffney tribute call (858) 822-2199. For further information on UCSD's Black History Month celebration visit <http://blackhistorymonth.ucsd.edu>.

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