



**National  
Urban League**

**To Be Equal #25**

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**African American Actors Take Center Stage at 2013 Tony Awards**

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*"I'm the sole surviving member of my immediate family. I've asked myself over and over again why. I now know why." Cicely Tyson, 2013 Tony Award, Best Actress in a Play*

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, Cicely Tyson became only the third African American woman in the 67-year history of the Tony Awards to win top honors for Best Actress in a Broadway play. She won for her mesmerizing portrayal of Carrie Watts, a widow in search of her past in "The Trip to Bountiful." In 2004, Phylicia Rashad became the first African American woman to win Best Actress for her portrayal of the matriarch, Lena Younger, in a revival of Lorraine Hansberry's classic, "A Raisin in the Sun." Viola Davis won in 2010 for her role as the wife of Troy Maxson as played by Denzel Washington in the Broadway revival of August Wilson's "Fences."

In a career that has spanned more than half a century, this was Cicely Tyson's first Tony Award. It came after a 30-year absence from the Broadway stage. In accepting her award she expressed her gratitude for being able to fulfill "a burning desire to do one more great role." Her award not only caps a career that includes award-winning performances on the stage, screen and television, it confirms the fact that Black is Back on Broadway. On Tony night, Cicely Tyson shared the spotlight with three other African American actors who took home Tony Awards: Billy Porter, Best Actor in a Musical -- "Kinky Boots;" Patina Miller, Best Actress in a Musical -- "Pippin;" and Courtney B. Vance, Best Actor in a featured role -- "Lucky Guy."

In addition to cheering the achievements of Ms. Tyson and the other African American Tony winners, we should also celebrate the fact that African American actors continue to make great strides on Broadway. In fact, over the years the Great White Way has featured and recognized many more Black performers than Hollywood. In 1950, Juanita Hall became the first Black entertainer to win a Tony Award for her portrayal of Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*. Since then, 49 Tony Awards have been awarded to Black actors and actresses, compared to only 14 Academy Awards for Black actors and actresses since 1939.

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Broadway's racial maturity has not come easy. From 1890 to 1910, most of the Blacks on Broadway were featured in African American minstrel shows, playing to all-white audiences. It was not until the 1935 production of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" that African Americans really hit it big on Broadway. The momentum has continued to build. The late August Wilson has a theater named after him. Audre McDonald has won five Tony Awards, tying her with Angela Lansbury and Julie Harris for the most in a career. And like Cicely Tyson, more Black actors and actresses are being cast in roles originally written for white performers.

It should also be noted that Ron Simons was the fifth African American to win a Tony this year as Producer of "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike," which won the Tony for Best Play. We congratulate all of this year's African American Tony winners. We hope their success will bring more Blacks to Broadway – both in the audience and on the stage.

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