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CLARENCE THOMAS, 75

S. Fla. actor an inspiration to many

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Longtime South Florida actor Clarence Thomas, whose work in films, TV and on the stage inspired a generation of younger black performers, died Sunday at age 75 in a Kendall nursing home.

Thomas, the first African-American Florida branch president of Screen Actors Guild (2000-'02), had been in poor health for much of the past decade, said actor John Archie, a protégé and frequent stage co-star.

"He has given service in so many ways to this community and the acting community," Archie said. "He was a wonderful actor, a fine man. He had an incredible mind."

The two met on an acting assignment just after Archie had graduated high school. "He was a dear friend. How? By giving me the best advice, by supporting me and letting me know I could achieve and do well in the business. He was just there for me."

SCREEN CREDITS

Among Thomas' bigscreen credits: Bob Fosse's *Lenny* (1974), *Cocoon* (1985) and *Rosewood* (1997). He also was in several TV movies and series, including *Miami Vice* and *American Playhouse*.

In South Florida, he was known for many stage performances, including his final theatrical production, *A Lesson Before Dying*, starring Archie at Gable-Stage in 2002.

Thomas was a public school teacher until his mid-40s, when the job began to interfere with his part-time acting career. He acted most of his adult life, about 40 years, but never won big acting awards or made a fortune, Archie said. "People outside the business don't understand," he said. "All they know is movie stars. They don't understand the guy sitting next to them works in all kinds of media and doesn't have any money."

Thomas, who was born in Arkansas and raised in Chicago, was married 56 years to the former Barbara Jones of Hialeah. They met when both attended Knoxville College in Tennessee. The Thomases, who had no children, moved to South Florida about a year after they graduated. Since the 1960s, they lived in the same home in Richmond Heights, said Eva Cofield, a family friend.

HURRICANE'S IMPACT

Hurricane Andrew devastated their house in 1992, but the Thomases rebuilt it "bigger and better," Cofield said.

Cofield still marvels at Clarence Thomas' acting abilities. "Whatever character he was, he was believable," she said. "In one play, at 9 o'clock every night he had to cry. He could do it right on cue. You felt so sorry for this character on stage who was crying his heart out."

Thomas inspired Cofield's son, Carl, to become an actor.

"I'm sure there's a whole crop of Miami actors, especially black actors, that Clarence touched that way," Carl Cofield said. "He taught us what it was to be a professional actor and how to be proud of it. His legacy lives on in a lot of actors who may not even know it."

Thomas helped Carl Cofield in a tangible way, too.

"He bought me a ticket to New York — on the condition that it was one way. He saw something in me. . . . That was in '92 and I've been in New York ever since."

On Tuesday, Cofield returned to Miami for Thomas' funeral.

“On the plane ride home today I was thinking the greatest thing he taught me about acting — that it was something to be treasured and something you could do.”

Thomas is survived by his wife. A service will be held for Thomas 1 p.m. Wednesday at New Bethel AME Church, 2275 W. Fifth Way, Hialeah.



HERALD FILE/MARCH 21, 2002

ON STAGE: Clarence Thomas, right, in ‘A Lesson Before Dying’ in 2002, with John Archie.