

WSU News

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Wichita State's Karla Burns built a legacy of music and drama around the world

By WSU Strategic Communications



Karla Burns appeared at some of the world's most famous venues, including the Paris Opera, the Teatro Real in Madrid, Spain, Egypt's Cairo Opera House, The Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall.

- Wichita Karla Burns received Britain's most prestigious theatrical award, the Lawrence Olivier, for her portrayal of Queenie in "Show Boat."
- Burns earned the Kansas African American Museum Trailblazer Award in 2000 and the Wichita Arts Council Award for Performance and Education in 2012.
- Burns, an operatic mezzo-soprano and actress, performed around the world and remain involved in theater in her hometown until her death.

Karla Burns' legacy of music and drama is one of Wichita State University's most prominent contributions to the performing arts.

Burns, 66, died June 4 in Wichita. She attended Dunbar Elementary School and graduated from West High School. At Wichita State, she earned bachelor's degrees in music education and in speech/theater, both in 1981.

In 2016, she was awarded an honorary doctorate and inducted into the [College of Fine Arts Hall of Fame](#).

She won the Laurence Olivier Award, Britain's most prestigious theater award, in 1991 for her role as Queenie in the musical "Show Boat." Burns, an operatic mezzo-soprano, was nominated for a Tony Award in 1983.

"She was a local, Wichita home-grown girl who made it big," Rick Bumgardner, a friend and artistic director at Roxy's Downtown, [told The Wichita Eagle](#). "Karla was a trailblazer."

Burns was [well-known for her role as Hi-Hat Hattie](#) in a one-woman show of the same name that chronicled the life of actress Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel, who won an Academy Award (1939) for her role as Mammy in "Gone with the Wind," also is from Wichita and played Queenie in "Show Boat."

KMUW's Carla Eckels [conducted several interviews with Burns](#), documenting her life on stage.