'Take You Wherever You Go'

Busy Tony Award-winning director Kenny Leon has found time to write a memoir sharing the great influences that shaped him as a person and artist. They were his mother and grandmother, who he lived with from age 4-8 in Tallahassee, Fla., as well as playwright August Wilson.

Leon says his grandmother’s words to him when he was a youth, “Take You Wherever You Go,” have been a guidepost throughout his life.

Living: What prompted your grandmother to say those words to you?
Leon: It was something that she always said. It was ongoing. It was the way she lived her life. I used to wear red Reeboks all the time. I said, “Grandma, do you think it’s cool to wear red Reeboks to church?” She said, “God, don’t care, but have a little class. Wear a matching bow tie. But you have to be you.” In 1992, when she died, I started wearing tennis shoes every day. They remind me to stay grounded.

What do actors teach you?
Leon: I always say any project is always a collaborative experiment. With Denzel [Washington], I like the way he makes me earn his trust. With Phylicia Rashad, it’s the many different ways that she can [express] every emotion. Sam [Jackson] is demanding. Like all great artists, he pushes me to be a greater director. Even when casting young people, it’s a test to teach.

You suggest people make a significant change in their lives every seven to 10 years?
Leon: People know if they are craving something new. We become insecure prisoners of our own false sense of security. I tell young folks they have everything they need inside of them. I tell them the same thing my grandmother said a long time ago: Always be yourself.

Kenny Leon appears at the Book Festival of the MJCCA on Nov. 18. kennyLeon.com