

National Black

National Black Theatre Festival Leaves behind Money and Memories

By MARK R. MOSS
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From the city's economic interests to the guardians of law and order, the National Black Theatre Festival, which ended last Saturday, was an overwhelming success.

Thousands of people came to town and collectively spent millions of dollars during the week-long affair that included plays, workshops, readings and celebrating with celebrities.

"I thought it was a *marvtastic* festival," said Larry Leon Hamlin, the festival's founder. "We had more productions, more performances, more celebrities — more celebrities who stayed longer — more workshops and more seminars.

"Somehow the spiritualness of this festival was heightened," he said. The love and respect everybody had for one another was at its pinnacle."

Fred Nordenholz, executive director of the Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce, said that although he couldn't provide a dollar amount on what festival-goers spent, the "anecdotal" evidence seems to point to an economic windfall for local businesses.

"Based on what people I've talked to said ... the hotel and hospitality people are delighted," he said.

Nordenholz said that since the event wasn't a convention, the Chamber had nothing to do with booking hotel rooms. Knowing the

number of booked rooms helps officials come up with an estimate of the amount of money a group spends, Nordenholz said.

However, he said, "anybody who just used their two eyes and went to the productions" would conclude that all was going well economically.

Nordenholz said that one of the "intangible" consequences of the festival was that the city got "good public relations."

"The name 'Winston-Salem' got out there in a prominent way," he said. "It (the festival) is something to put in our basket of things to use when we sell Winston-Salem."

Alderman Robert Northington Jr. concurred that the festival was a public-relations bonanza.

"Winston-Salem is being identified in the press on a national basis," he said, "and that's not something you can go out and buy. Anybody who thought that this was not economic development was either comatose or unconscious."

Northington, chairman of the board of alderman's Finance Committee, said the committee on Monday night approved a \$35,000 grant to help fund the 1995 festival.

Northington said that he attended the opening night gala and the production — *Celebrations: An African Odyssey* — that followed and was impressed by the quality of the performance.

Police Sgt. C.E. Vance, who works out of the downtown foot patrol office on Fourth Street,

described working the festival as "very easy duty." "Everybody was in a partying mood," he said. Extra officers were assigned to work the festival, Vance said, some directing traffic and offering directions to out-of-towners.

When asked what she enjoyed most about the festival, Kathy Lee, production supervisor at the *Winston-Salem Chronicle*, mentioned "Mother Gospel," a production starring Della Reese.

"It was one of those plays that left you with a smile on your face," she said. "It left you feeling good."

She also was impressed with the actors she met: Ted Lange and Al Freeman.

"The festival gave everybody a chance to mingle with the stars,"

said Larry Butler, an assistant vice president at Wachovia. "Winston really flourished. I thought the whole festival was fantastic."

He said that he and his wife, Diane, haven't missed a festival since it started in 1989.

Blanche Carter, manager of university relations at Winston-Salem State University, served as a volunteer usher at the production of "Last Night at Ace High," which starred members of the New York-based Negro Ensemble Co.

Carter, a native New Yorker, said, "It was just great to feel the energy that was emanating from all these talented people. The festival is something that I think we should be proud of."

Photos by C.O. Matthews

