

Festival volunteers get the star treatment

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

You probably won't see people scrambling to take pictures of Olyer Martin and Lauren Burch this week during the National Black Theatre Festival. The women aren't the stars of plays or even supporting players, but without them and hundreds like them the glitz and excitement of the festival would not be possible. In fact, there would be no festival.

Martin and Burch joined fellow festival volunteers July 31 at Stevens Center for a pre-festival pep rally. For more than an hour the nearly 700 volunteers were patted on the back, entertained by local talent and given their formal charge for the week by festival chief Larry Leon Hamlin.

Martin is expected to man one of the informational desks this week. She has been a volunteer since the 1995 festival.

"I love it," she said as she stood in line to pick up her purple and black volunteer T-shirt. "You get to see people from out of town and tell them wonderful things about Winston-Salem."

Burch will serve as an usher, helping people who attend shows at the Adam's Mark Hotel to their seats. She first volunteered at the festival six years ago. Her initial experience as a volunteer has kept her coming back festival after festival.

"I like being able to partici-



Olyer Martin, left, gets help choosing a volunteer T-shirt.

Photo by Kevin Walker

pate and help out with this festival," she said. "It is great to meet and greet with some of our people and meet some of the stars."

Volunteers are an invaluable part of the NBTF machine. Without them, none of the other parts would run. Hamlin said that if the festival had to pay 700 people to do the jobs that volunteers perform, the price tag would be too great for the festival to absorb.

The thousands who come to the city for the festival also rely on volunteers, Hamlin said.

"When they come here, (volunteers) treat them with such

respect, such kindness, such love. It makes them not want to leave," he said.

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, Larry Leon Hamlin's wife, is the volunteers coordinator. She has been working with some of the volunteers since March. Sprinkle-Hamlin said she is impressed with the cross section of volunteers who will perform such tasks as transporting actors, helping with stage set-ups and providing security.

"We have a group of young people and seniors who are really working very, very hard," said

Sprinkle-Hamlin, who also pointed out that people of every age in between have decided to donate their time as well.

So although Kim Fields, Diahann Carroll and Malcolm-Jamal Warner are bound to get a lot of attention this week, there are other stars whose names may not ring a bell but whose deeds are priceless.

"There will be many stars here...but you are our stars. Let your lights shine," Annie Johnson, Hamlin's mother, told the crowd as she kicked off last week's rally.

Malcolm-Jamal Warner expresses himself

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

Malcolm-Jamal Warner is best known for his work as an actor on television, but he's quickly garnering acclaim for his work in the underground poetry movement. Warner, this year's National Black Theatre Festival honorary co-chair, said poetry affords him an opportunity for unlimited self-expression.

"I'm not just an actor who decided to do poetry. I am a poet, and I have been seriously in the trenches for 10 years now," said Warner, who is debuting a play at the festival, "Love & Other Social Issues," which he co-wrote with his mother, Pamela Warner. Denise Dowse directs the play.

The play deals with love and life from this poet's perspective, and Warner hopes festival audiences will find its message to be universally appealing.

"It's very freeing when you have something to say and when you have something to say that everyone can relate to," Mal-

colm-Jamal Warner said.

Since appearing on "The Cosby Show," where Warner became a household name, he has gone on to make a name for himself in film, theater and music. He has appeared on stage in "Cryin' Shame," "Freefall" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; in feature films such as "Drop Zone" and "Restaurant"; and in television films such as "The Tuskegee Airmen" and "The Father Clements Story."

Warner, who also plays bass in the jazz-funk band Miles Long, has numerous directing credits under his multi-talented belt, including episodes of "Malcolm and Eddie" (a series in which he starred), "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" and "Sesame Street."

"I love the collaborative effort of acting, directing and being in a band," Warner said.

Although the entertainment industry can be lucrative for some actors, Warner said it's still important for performers to love and improve their respective crafts and not become preoccupied with money.

"If you are an artist and you've chosen a craft, you have to do it because you love it...When money comes into the picture, then you start doing things to compromise your art, and artists don't do it for the

money," Warner said.

Warner can currently be seen on "Jeremiah," a new weekly sci-fi series on Showtime.

"Love and Other Social

Issues" will be performed tomorrow and Saturday at 3 and 8 p.m. at the N.C. School of the Arts Arena. Tickets are \$35 and can be purchased by calling 723-7907.

Shaft in Winston



Actor Richard Roundtree took time to pose with fans in the lobby of the Adam's Mark Hotel. Roundtree is perhaps most famous for his role as crime fighter Shaft.

Photo by Kevin Walker

Festival

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Some worked with one another on projects years ago, and the festival is providing an opportunity for them to see one another again.

Maurice Hines was thrilled to see Diahann Carroll, for whom he and brother Gregory opened for at the Apollo Theatre when the Hineses were tots.

"My mother kept a scrapbook of Greg and I, and the three pictures she kept in the scrapbook (were) Sammy Davis Jr., Eartha Kitt and Diahann Carroll," said Hines, an accomplished dancer and Broadway actor.

Actress RaeVen Larrimore Kelly, an 18-year-old who has been coming to the festival since she was 10, pointed out that several actresses at this year's festival have played her mother on television or on the big screen. Among them was Tonia Stewart, who played Kelly's mother in "A Time to Kill."

I have three mothers at this festival," Kelly joked.

One of the highlights of this and every festival was Monday's Opening Night Gala. The gala, which sold out quickly this year, brought about 1,000 people to a swankily decorated M.C. Benton Convention Center. Local African drum and dance troupe Otesha Creative Arts Ensemble got the party jumping by energetically leading a procession that included countless celebrities and special guests such as Mayor Allen Joiner and Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke.

Hamlin, Melba Moore and her fellow honorary co-chair, Malcolm-Jamal Warner, oversaw an awards ceremony that hon-



Andre De Shields leads celebrities in "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Photo by Kevin Walker

ored some of entertainment's best and most enduring. Carroll and Broadway producer Philip Rose received the highest honor, the Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award. Lynn Hamilton, Novella Nelson, Adam Wade and Gloria Van Scott were on hand to pick up Living Legend Awards.

Hamilton, whose face is bound to be familiar if her name does not ring a bell, played on "Roots," "The Waltons" and as Fred Sanford's lady friend, Donna, on "Sanford and Son." In her acceptance speech she talked about being deemed a "legend."

"There is something scary and awesome about that word," she said.

Actors Ben Vereen and Sherman Hemsley also received Living Legend Awards, but neither man was in attendance. Vereen sent his sister to accept his award, while Hemsley's television son, Damon Evans from "The Jeffersons," accepted on Hemsley's

behalf. Evans gave a reason why Hemsley possibly stayed away from the festival.

"He is one of the shyest and most unassuming people I know," Evans said.

In accepting the Larry Leon Hamlin Producer's Award, Carl Clay urged the crowd to support events such as the National Black Theatre Festival and black theater in general. It is one of the few institutions that blacks can still call sacred, he said.

"We offer truth...We offer our shoulders for young people to stand on," Clay said.

Hamlin has found wide acceptance for the festival. Thousands from other cities are expected to attend this year's festival. Local officials predict that they could pump as much as \$10 million into the staggering local economy. The NBTF has managed to carve a niche for itself in the somewhat crowded world of arts festivals.

Jennifer Sanders is among those visiting the city for the first time as a result of the festival. She and her mother came from Evanston, Ill., after hearing great word-of-mouth about the festival.

"(My mother) said that if it is going on this year, she wants to go. We looked on the Internet and found out it was this summer and we drove down," she said. Sanders was only in Winston-Salem for a few hours Monday when she decided that the festival was definitely something she will return to.

"I get excited when black people have something positive that we can get together and do," she said.

The NBTF will wrap up Saturday night. There are still tickets left for many plays. Log onto www.nbtf.org for a schedule and ticket information.

NBTF Bits

Surprise!

Forsyth County Commissioner Walter Marshall got a surprise that he won't soon forget on Monday.

Marshall, whose distinguished public career stretches back for decades and includes stints as president of the local NAACP and a seat on the city-county School Board, received a standing ovation from dozens of celebrities during the first news conference of the 2003 National Black Theatre Festival.

Marshall also was presented with a carved wooden elephant from the celebrities for his years of work with the transportation wing of the festival.

"I was very surprised. I had no idea it was going to happen," Marshall said. The county commissioner has been volunteering with the festival since it started in 1989. During recent festivals, he has helped to make sure that celebrity guests are picked up from the airport and arrive on time to venues for their shows. His deeds have obviously not gone unappreciated.

Marshall said he volunteers because he loves the work, the festival and this city.

"I believe in this city and this county. This festival is really helping to promote our town," he said.



Walter Marshall with his gift.

Back to his roots

Malik Yoba is best known for the wildly successful 1990s series "New York Undercover," but his love of acting began by watching theater, not television.

As a child he was an usher at the Negro Ensemble Company in New York.

"I used to sit in the back of the theater and meet the likes of people like Sam Jackson," Yoba said. He eventually made his way onto the stage himself and recently has returned to his first love, working the "chitlin' circuit." Yoba said the stage provides more freedom for black actors.

"New York Undercover" was yanked from the air during the height of its success, reportedly over salary disputes between actors and producers. Yoba said there is a blatant "lack of regard" for blacks in Hollywood. He said black actors should determine their own destinies by creating their own projects.

"We have to build our own generators," he said. "So when they turn off the power, we still have lights."

Yoba is scheduled to host a session of the NBTF International Colloquium this morning from 10 until 12:30 p.m. at the Adam's Mark Hotel. The session is titled "Creating (Your) Own Place and Own Idiom of Existence."



Malik Yoba

Roarin' Success

Greensboro native Horace Rogers is among the many N.C. Black Repertory Company alumni who have returned to Winston-Salem this week for the National Black Theatre Festival.

It was at the very first festival in 1989 that Rogers got his big break in the play "Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope." Rogers felt back then that the festival had staying power.

"I had a feeling that something special was going on. There was such a buzz," he said.

Rogers, a proud graduate of N.C. A&T State University, has flexed his acting ability and vocal cords in a number of productions since then, including "Rent" and his current role as Mufasa in "The Lion King" at Toronto's Princess of Wales Theatre.

Rogers has done his part over the years to make the NBTF a success. He was the media liaison for the 2001 festival and this year he lent his voice, without warning, to pay tribute to friends of the festival who have recently passed away. Festival founder Larry Leon Hamlin asked Rogers on Monday to sing a song while the names of the deceased were called out. Rogers chose "If I Can Help Somebody" and delivered a powerful a cappella performance.

Rogers is pleased that a number of young people are involved with this year's festival. He thinks the event will have the same effect on them that it had on him 14 years ago.

"I know there are other young people who will be out there watching the shows and are going to be (taken in) by the whole spirit of the festival," he said.



Horace Rogers as Mufasa.