

Hot Summer For Gay Theatre

Financially and artistically, Charlotte live theatre this summer has succeeded amazingly for the city's gay/lesbian community:

■ "Torch Song Trilogy," produced in June by the New Life Players, earned \$600 profit for New Life Metropolitan Community Church.

■ "As Is," staged by the Little Theatre of Charlotte in July, far exceeded expectations in attendance and produced more than \$3,000 in benefit funds for Metrolina AIDS project with just one of its eight performances.

"Torch Song" featured novice actors who exceeded all expectations for a troupe whose only previous experience was a series of comedy skits and a production of "Bent" last year. Charlotte Observer critic Lawrence Toppman was so moved by the production that he labeling it a "must-see." A packed house

gave the closing performance a 10-minute standing ovation with three curtain calls.

It was a moment of memorable emotion for Charlotte's gay/lesbian community.

"I sat there and cried," said Tom Caudle, who directed the play. "As many times as I had seen and heard it, that night everything hit and I was not the only one to cry."

Toppman's massive feature story on gay/lesbian theatre in Charlotte came after "Torch Song" and previewed "As Is," a bold step for the Little Theatre, North Carolina's oldest community theatre organization.

"As Is" — with its raw language and intense interaction between a man with AIDS and his lover — brought the gay and nongay communities in Charlotte together as they seldom, if ever, have

been.

On the night of the performance designated as the MAP benefit, tickets were \$15, which was \$9 more than tickets to other performances. After the performance, the Little Theatre presented a check for \$2,700 from ticket sales to MAP president Ron Lowe. But there was more. In a donation box for MAP that sat in the lobby, people had dropped \$320. And a man handed MAP executive director Les Kooyman a check for \$200.

"Those were just the tangibles," said Keith Martin, the Little Theatre's artistic director. "The intangibles were even more important."

"People volunteered to help MAP staff its hotline and work with other MAP projects. Hospice of Charlotte (a cosponsor, with MAP, of the play) has had a tremendous increase in phone calls for information. Little Theatre had a dramatic increase in orders for the regular subscription series the week after 'As Is' finished its run and orders are still coming in. A lot of people came to Little Theatre who had never been there before."

"And we had all that literature in the lobby. It kept disappearing (as people took it) by the handful. Ron (of MAP) kept bringing over boxes of material; so did Hospice and the Red Cross. We had people returning to the theatre the day after they saw the play asking for more brochures and literature."

Martin explained that the Little Theatre expected to average only 87 people in the audience for each performance — a total of 700 and the break-even point financially since tickets were priced at \$6, half the price Little Theatre charges for regular season performances. However, more than 1,400 people attended. The MAP benefit was a sell-out with 31 people still in line.

Throughout the run, the program handed to audience members as they took seats included a half-page announcement about MAP; and the back of the program gave names and phone numbers of nonsocial gay/lesbian groups in Charlotte.

The night of the MAP benefit, members of the Tradesmen — Charlotte's levi/leather group — ushered, wearing white shirts, jeans, black leather vests and boots. Martin related that one older lady, a regular supporter of Little Theatre, brightly asked an usher, "Are you



Barry Bishop of the Tradesmen ushers members of the audience to their seats prior to the MAP benefit performance of "As Is."

in the play? You have such wonderful costumes."

"The actors," Martin said, "were more nervous for the benefit performance because they knew the audience was educated about the subject and socially

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Charlotte Now Bathless As Club South Closes

By DON KING
Editor

On Sunday, July 26, the last customer walked out of Club South — and Charlotte joined a long list of American cities where gay bath houses have closed since 1984.

There had been no pressure from the city of Charlotte or the state of North Carolina. The corporate owner simply decided to close the Carolinas' only gay baths with dignity rather than face the criticism and pressure that, in the age of AIDS, has forced the closing of bath houses all over the country.

"We felt the writing was on the wall," a company spokesman said. "We knew the days for the baths were numbered. There were other factors involved such as facing a new long-term lease and having to reimburse the owner of the building for a significant increase in business insurance. Probably, we could have overcome all that, but we didn't see the point if we had to face tremendous pressure to close in the near future."

"I hate to see Club South go," he said. "But when the AIDS crisis first broke, there was something of a mass panic and the baths came close to dying then. Business just went away. The only salvation we had was that when the panic began to subside a little bit and the bookstore harassment started, business began to pick up. But for the last four or five years, we've done nothing more

than hang on."

Club South was the only baths between Atlanta and Washington for 10½ years. It opened in January of 1977 a few months after the city's first bath house, Club Charlotte on West Morehead Street, closed.

Gay bath houses in the U.S. were actually an evolution of bath houses, primarily in the midwest, that enabled cowboys of frontier days to have an inexpensive place to wash away layers of trail dust and get a good night's sleep. Gradually they became known as businesses where sex between men was expected and welcomed.

Gay baths reached a peak of popularity in the 1970s, sparked partly by Bette Midler's early-career performances in the Cosmopolitan Baths of New York City. For a brief time among trendier nongay jetsetters, "going to the baths" for the entertainment became an in-thing to do; and a baths-style business opened for an even briefer time in NYC for non-gay anonymous sex.

Another NYC bath house — the Everard — gained particular fame among gay men as a center of orgiastic sex.

Neither the Everard nor the Cosmopolitan still exists as relentless pressure since the advent of AIDS from within and outside the gay male communities in large metropolitan areas have forced one house after another to close. Club South is the latest casualty.

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