

# Moore has survived and lived to sing about it

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD  
THE CHRONICLE

You may think you know Melba Moore but she's almost certain that you don't. The Tony Award winner has shined on stage, film and radio over the last 30 years. Even at this point in her career, Moore believes people are still trying to define exactly who she is.

"As an artist I've never really been seen. People think they know what it is that I am but they don't because my abilities are very varied," said Moore, who co-chaired the 2003 National Black Theatre Festival. She returned this year to perform her autobiographical one-woman show, "Melba Moore: Sweet Songs of the Soul," which she is producing with the New Federal Theatre. Audiences will embark on a journey through Moore's life and career to the tune of songs, some of which will be familiar to fans.

Southerners, she says, and those familiar with Southern culture will find her story especially endearing. Moore, who was raised by a Southerner, includes anecdotes from her rearing in the play.

The creative process for Moore was challenging, she admits, and it was one where she called on any industry pro she knew in order to help her bring the production to fruition.

"Anyway you look at it, it was tough because I'm not a playwright," said Moore, who lives in New York.

Rather than take on a role that could've been played by anyone, Moore opted to portray her own story. For years, Moore says, people have been urging her to return to the stage.

"It's autobiographical because at least I know my life," she said. "I really never told people that my mother was a singer. I talk about her (in the play) in that way and why I'm in the industry."

Moore ran into financial troubles during the 1990s after her divorce



Melba Moore is escorted into Monday's gala by Jeffrey Anderson-Gunter. Moore's show will be staged Friday and Saturday.

from her husband of 15 years. She was forced to apply for food stamps among other public assistance in order to survive when she was forsaken by many people who she

thought were friends. Moore says her industry credentials were cut off during her absence despite the career she had carved out for herself. "I was blackballed.... I had peo-

ple telling me, 'I wasn't around when you came. I don't know you so that doesn't count,'" she said. "I had good management. I had great management for a little while, but there was nobody around to give me the wisdom to lay out a plan."

Moore's big break came in the 1970s, by accident as she tells it, when she was cast in the hit musical "Hair." Producers replaced lead white actress Diane Keaton with Moore, much to the shock of the Broadway community, after the show's composers heard Moore's album recordings of the musical.

She went on to land the role of Lutibelle Gussiemae Jenkins in "Purlie," which earned her a Tony Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Musical. Moore's singing career took off over the next decade where she saw such hits as "Love's Comin' at Ya," "This Is It," "Lean on Me," and a duet with Freddie Jackson called "A Little Bit More."

"A series of wonderful things have happened, but you need some continuity," she said.

She re-emerged around 10 years ago when she returned to Broadway with a starring role in "Les Miserables." Moore, who also starred in "The Fighting Temptations," released a gospel CD last year titled "Nobody But Jesus."

More than anything, she hopes "Sweet Songs of the Soul" will give the audience an opportunity to connect with her experience.

"There isn't anything left out. It's all the things I could do. The whole essence is there and the story is the star," said Moore. "I'm telling a story that's right for me to tell."

"Melba Moore: Sweet Songs of the Soul" will be staged along with "Keyah Live!...Mostly: A True Variety Show" on Friday and Saturday at both 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. at Winston-Salem State University's K.R. Williams Auditorium. Tickets are \$40 and can be purchased at the show or the ticket center in Benton Convention Center.

## NBTF

from page A1

ger that theater actors have because we know that not everybody can do theater," said Malcolm-Jamal Warner, who gained fame on "The Cosby Show" and other television series but has found a voice and a following with his one-man spoken-word show, "Love & Other Social Issues."

In all, more than 100 performances of nearly two dozen productions will be staged this week. But over the years, the shows have become only one part of the festival's magic. The event gives downtown a much needed adrenaline rush. Streets that are usually dead by 9 p.m. are doused with the beat of drums, the smell of good food, and the sounds and laughter of people. This city, if only for a week, becomes the city that does not sleep.

"We are going to do it up this week," Hamlin predicted on Monday.

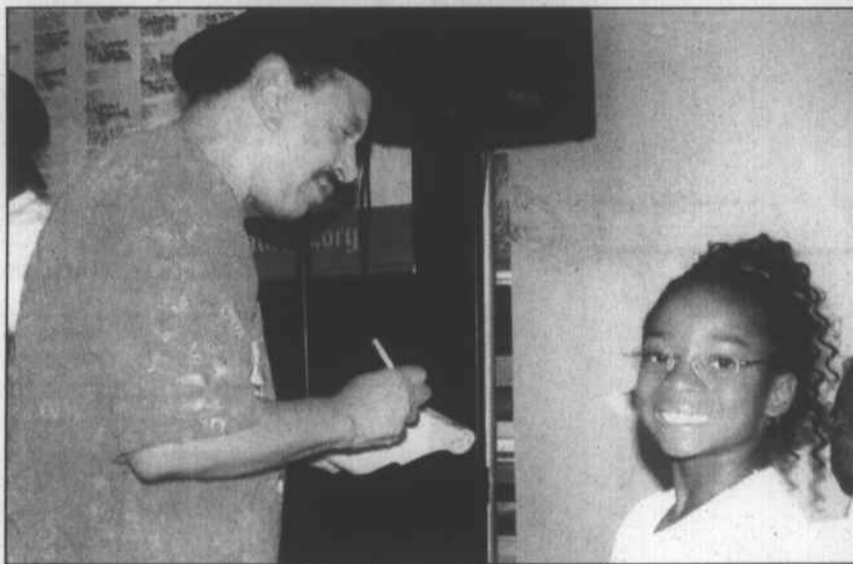
Thousands of people are expected in the city this week to take it all in. These visitors will spend loads of money, which hotels and downtown shops are not complaining about, and get the chance to experience Winston-Salem at its best.

Count eight-year-old Ta-Naya Dunlap among the visitors. She traveled with her grandmother, Dorothy Gamble, from Pottstown, Pa. Gamble, who has a daughter (Valencia Dunlap) who lives in Winston-Salem, had heard amazing things about the NBTF. She wanted to experience it for herself, but she especially wanted Ta-Naya to come and enjoy herself.

"She has never been on a vacation before," Gamble said about her granddaughter. "We worked all the year so that we could come here."

The notepad Ta-Naya brought with her to collect autographs was already well-used by Monday afternoon. Even celebrities in a rush found it hard to say no to a cute little girl with big smile. She added Sherman Hemsley's and Larry Leon Hamlin's signatures to her book just seconds before they were to take part in a news conference.

Bob and Jean Andrews also came to Winston-Salem from their home in Vancouver, Wash., after hearing incredible things about the festival from their friends Samuel and Mable Stevenson. As the couple walked into the Ben-



Sherman Hemsley signs an autograph for Ta-Naya Dunlap.

ton Convention Center for Monday's Opening Night Gala, they were already impressed.

"This is just great," said Jean Andrews. "We are definitely going to tell our friends about this. A lot of people in Washington do not know about this event."

A lot more than theater fans and stargazers have come to the festival. Ayeje Feamster came with other actors from the Triangle area to take part in a reading of the play "Same Train." Feamster and Mark Bruckner, the show's composer/lyricist, performed a bluesy number inspired by the play in the lobby of the Marriott on Tuesday as a way to promote the reading, which took place on Wednesday at the Sawtooth Center.

Feamster, who recently graduated from the performing arts program at N.C. Central University, said the festival has given her inspiration to continue to pursue her artistic aspirations.

"Here, I see the beauty of what this business can be," she said. "I am just overwhelmed by the love and support I feel here."

This marks the 16th anniversary of the very first festival in 1989. Hamlin had long

dreamed of creating an event where black theater companies could come to show their work and gain inspiration from others. But even Hamlin admits that the event has grown into something even grander - something that even he never imagined.

Actor Antonio Fargas, who worked with Hamlin's N.C. Black Repertory Company years before there was such a thing as the National Black Theatre Festival, has also marveled at the festival's evolution.

"It has been an incredible ride," he said. "Who knew that Larry Leon Hamlin's vision would turn into the mecca of black theater."



Ayeje Feamster and Mark Bruckner perform in the lobby of the Marriott.



Actress Irma P. Hall poses with her Living Legend Award. Also pictured is co-chair Janet Hubert.

# NOTES



## Ms. NBTF

Ella Joyce doesn't wear a crown or sash but everyone knows that she is the queen of the National Black Theatre Festival. Few celebrities have come to the biennial event as frequently as she has. This one makes her seventh straight festival. She has performed in plays at six of those festivals, including this one.

Joyce, who is best known for her role as Eleanor Emerson on the sitcom "Roc," is starring in "Willie & Esther," which has its final shows today (Aug. 4) at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. at Winston-Salem State University's K.R. Williams Auditorium.

Monday, Joyce was honored for her dedication to the NBTF with an award during the Opening Night Gala. The award was a surprise for Joyce; she was left speechless.

"I have never seen this woman at a loss for words," Janet Hubert joked as a stunned Joyce accepted the honor. Joyce was not completely at a loss for words. She thanked Larry Leon Hamlin and vowed that she would continue to come to each festival.

"I am not going nowhere," she said.

## Expressing themselves

It seems that spoken-word poetry is everywhere these days - on television on shows like "Def Poetry," in coffee shops and nightclubs and, yes, at the National Black Theatre Festival. The festival has hosted the popular Midnight Poetry Jam since

2001. The jams allow professionals and novices to share the same stage as they read their work to a crowd of hundreds. Crowds will be even larger at this year's festival. The jams have been moved from Embassy Suites Hotel to the neighboring Benton Convention Center in order to provide more room.

"Hopefully we will not have to turn anyone away this year like we had to in 2003," said Helena Lewis, who is co-hosting the jams this year along with actor/poet Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

Lewis, a New Jersey-based spoken-word artist, first came to the NBTF in 2003. She said she was impressed by the diversity of the poets who perform at the jams.

"There were people who were 80-year-olds there. You usually don't get that diversity in one spot," she said.

Lewis, who credits people like Amiri Baraka and Sonja Sanchez (who is attending this year's festival) for paving the way, knows that the art of spoken word is nothing new, but she says with events like the jams and television programs like HBO's "Def Poetry," spoken word has reached a totally new plateau.

"It has never been at this level before," she said.

The last two Midnight Poetry Jams will be held tonight (Aug. 4) and Friday. To sign up to read your work, see the information desk at the Marriott.



## Fast service

Actress/singer Dawnn Lewis did not even have a chance to check into her hotel room Tuesday before she was summoned to take part in a noon news conference. Lewis, best known for her roles on "A Different World" and "Hangin' With Mr. Cooper," made an unusual request while at the podium.

"Anybody got any chicken, because I am hungry?" she said. She had a more serious message after that. Lewis told the droves of people who gather in the lobby of the Marriott for the daily press briefings that they should not spend the whole festival mingling and gawking at famous faces. She reminded them of the daily workshops, seminars and activities.

"If you want it, it is here for you," she said. She also reminded them about the great plays and musicals that will be staged throughout the week. Lewis has been to past festivals as a performer. She is not in any production this year.

"I am totally here to enjoy and support black theater," she said. By the time Lewis had finished her remarks, someone had placed a biscuit near her seat.

"Ask and you shall receive," she said, hoisting the biscuit into the air with her hand.