

# NOTES

## Long time no see

One of the National Black Theatre Festival's oldest friends has made a triumphant return to the event this year. Phyllis Yvonne Stickney served as the festival's first celebrity ambassador during the inaugural event in 1989, in the days before the NBTF had celebrity co-chairs:



Stickney's ambassador duties were similar to that of co-chairs. She hobnobbed with fans and served as a cheerleader for festival plays and events. She has come back to the festival this year after a

more than 10 year absence.

"I just needed to regroup," the talented actress, standup comic and writer said about her NBTF hiatus. Stickney's relationship with the N.C. Black Repertory Company actually stretches back to 1981, years before the festival was started. She came to town back then to star in the Black Rep's "The Amen Corner." She said Tuesday that she was pleased that the festival had grown into such a positive and popular event.

"When I was here it was still a work in progress," she said.

Stickney - whose film credits include "Malcolm X," "What's Love Got to Do with It," "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," and "New Jack City" - is performing at this year's festival but not in a play. Stickney plans to perform some of her spoken-word pieces at the festival's Midnight Poetry Jam. Stickney's brother - soap star Timothy D. Stickney - is also on hand for this year's festival.



## Chester as Chester

National Black Theatre Festival audiences know Chester Gregory II only as Jackie Wilson. Gregory has become legendary himself by playing legend Wilson in the wildly popular musical "The Jackie Wilson Story (My Heart is Crying, Crying...)." Saturday night, Gregory is hoping that his fans like him as himself.

He is a talented singer/songwriter in addition to being an actor. He will debut his first single, "High Love," during a live performance Saturday at midnight at Speakeasy Jazz on Fourth Street. The song is from a CD that he is hard at work on and hopes to release in the fall.

Gregory says his style is unique but if he had to compare it, it would be a cross between Usher and John Legend. A native of Gary, Ind., Gregory grew up imitating the sound and moves of Michael Jackson (also a Gary native).

"It is kind of ironic because Jackie Wilson was Michael Jackson's role model," Gregory said. Is Gregory still a fan of the King of Pop in light of the singer's recent legal woes? Of course.

"He is still the greatest," Gregory said. "Let us all pray for Michael."

## Power of positive thinking

Actress CCH Pounder made an addendum to the introductory remarks Larry Leon Hamlin made about her at Monday's kickoff news conference for the National Black Theatre Festival. Pounder, whose endless credits include "Prizzi's Honor," "Face/Off" and "Bagdad Café," added that she recently received an Emmy nomination for Best Supporting Actress in a Drama Series for her role as Detective Claudette Wyms on the hit FX show "The Shield."

It is not her first Emmy nod. She was nominated in the same category for her role as Dr. Angela Hicks on the long-running "ER." She has also been nominated for a guest appearance she made on "The X-Files."

Pounder says she has learned not to take the nominations for granted. The process used to select nominees ensures that only television's best and brightest are chosen, she said. Pounder said with this nomination, she is going to remain upbeat and positive.

"I have decided to name it and claim it," she said.

Pounder, who was born in the South American nation of Guyana, has been nominated for several other awards, including NAACP Image Awards and even a Grammy for Best Spoken Word Album.

When asked if she would prepare a speech for the upcoming Emmys, she smiled and said, "I have had prepared speeches for 25 years."

The Emmys will be handed out on Sept. 18 on CBS. (Keep your fingers crossed that CCH's name is called.)

# Despite fame, actor remains humble

BY T. KEVIN WALKER  
THE CHRONICLE

Bokeem Woodbine worked as a construction worker, foot messenger and several other blue collar jobs before Hollywood discovered his star quality.

The New Yorker stumbled into acting after he landed a job as an extra in a film that was shooting in his neighborhood. That movie was the 1992 urban drama "Juice." Woodbine left an impression on the film's casting director, who called the actor months later to encourage him to try out for the lead role in the 1993 HBO film "Strapped." Woodbine won the role after the film's director, Forrest Whitaker, went to bat for him.

The roles came with ease after that. There was "Jason's Lyric" in '94, "Dead Presidents" in '95 and the action blockbuster "The Rock" in '96.

"I have been blessed since '92," Woodbine said Sunday. "I have not taken any (acting) classes. I have not done any theater. I think I am just a lucky guy."

Woodbine, whose credits also include "Life" and "Crooklyn," has come to the 2005 National Black Theatre Festival despite his lack of a stage credit. The actor, who has lived in Los Angeles since 2001, said he wanted to see if all the talk he heard about the festival was true.

"I heard it is a fun time and that I would be well taken care of, and so far, they have been right about everything," he said.

Woodbine has been popular this week among stargazers. Though he is a bona fide Hollywood star, he maintains his blue-collar, average-guy disposition. At a pre-festival reception Sunday hosted by NBTF sponsor Truliant Federal Credit Union, Woodbine made quick friends with just about everybody who crossed his path. He said he is just being himself.

"I am a very nice guy," he said with a smile.

Woodbine said he doesn't take what he does for a living for granted. Although work for him has been steady, there have been times when he felt that the well was about to run dry.

"I had a slow 2001 and 2002," he said. "I could not get hired across the frigg'in' street, but that is over and done with."



Actor Bokeem Woodbine, standing beside a festival volunteer, gives the peace sign.

He says his fortunes changed for the better in 2004 when he landed the role of musician Fathead Newman in "Ray." Since he finished "Ray," which was nominated for a Best Picture Oscar, Woodbine has done four movies back to back, including "Edmond," which is based on a David Mamet play.

This week's festival may give Woodbine more motivation to try his ample acting chops on the stage. The 32-year-old says it is a dream that he plans to make come true - someday.

"I will probably hit the stage before I am 40, but I can't say when. It will probably be on my 39th birthday," he said with a chuckle.

# Gala honors late greats

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

The Opening Night Gala of the National Black Theatre Festival is usually one of the most festive times of the weeklong festival. It was somewhat somber this year, though.



Maggie Brown accepts her father's award.

The NBTF lost one of its best friends in February when legendary actor Ossie Davis passed away. Davis and his wife, Ruby Dee, served as the celebrity co-chairs of the 1991 festival and had been frequent guests at the festival over the years.

Dee - a legend as well - was on hand at the gala for a special tribute to her late husband. Footage of Davis shot at the 2001 festival, the last one he attended, was shown during the event. The actor talked about the importance of young people getting a good, solid education, even if they wanted to pursue careers in entertainment.

Before presenting Dee with an immaculate mahogany wood sculpture, Hamlin told her that the Opening Night Gala would now be known as the Ossie Davis Opening Night Gala in honor of the late actor.

"We could not have done all the things that we have, if we didn't (have Davis' and Dee's) support," Hamlin said.

Mayor Allen Joines and Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke had an honor of their own for Davis. By a resolution of the mayor, Monday, Aug. 1 was named Ossie Davis Day in Winston-Salem. Dee said that she was grateful and touched by the tributes.

Singer, songwriter, actor and playwright Oscar Brown Jr. was also honored posthumously at the gala. Brown is probably best known for his classic 1960s album "Sin and Soul." Brown died in May in his native Chicago. He was 78.

Brown's daughter, Maggie Brown, accepted the Sidney Poitier Lifelong Achievement Award on behalf of her father.

"I know daddy would have loved to come to be a part of this," she said.

Maggie Brown used most of the time she was allotted for an acceptance speech to perform one of her father's songs, "A Tree and Me."

# CLOWNIN' AROUND



Actress Ella Joyce and Rasta make funny faces for the camera. Rasta is best known for a series of football-inspired commercials he did for Reebok. The commercials debuted during the Super Bowl a few years ago.

# Honored director has Winston-Salem roots

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

When Larry Leon Hamlin began his introduction for director Jeff Byrd, James Byrd ran down the center aisle at the Opening Night Gala with his camera in hand. James Byrd is Jeff's proud father and he wanted to capture the moment that his son received a Lifelong Achievement in Film Award before a sea of celebrity guests and a crowd of more than 1,000 people.

Several people who were in that crowd are relatives of the young director. Although Jeff Byrd was a New Yorker, he spent his summers here in Winston-Salem under the watchful eye of his uncles, aunts and other relatives. James Byrd is a city native. He and his wife, Audra, now live in Eden.

Jeff Byrd is living out his dreams in New York, Los Angeles and anywhere his job takes him. By all accounts, he is poised to make big waves in the world of directing, just like his mentor Spike Lee, whom Byrd worked with before striking out on his own. "Jasper, Texas," a Showtime movie Byrd directed about the brutal dragging death of a black man in that town at the hands of skinheads, received wide acclaim. He most recently directed (and co-produced) the comedy "King's Ransom," which stars Anthony Anderson and Jay Mohr.

In his acceptance speech at Monday's gala, Byrd said he was in awe of the company he was in. He sat on the dais alongside people such as Ruby Dee, Antonio Fargas and Douglas Turner Ward. Robert Townsend and Melvin Van Peebles (neither



Director Jeff Byrd poses with his award and his parents, James and Audra Byrd (on his right), and his aunt Elwillie Jarrett and her husband, Carl.

of whom were on hand for the gala) were the other honorees in the Lifelong Achievement in Film category.

Byrd said that as he pondered why he, a relative newcomer, was receiving such an honor, his aunt

Elwillie Jarrett gave him the answer he needed to hear.

"She said, 'You are getting this award so that you can see the bar so that you can rise to it,'" Byrd said.