

OPINION

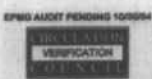
THE CHRONICLE

ERNEST H. PITT Publisher/Co-Founder

ELAINE PITT Business Manager

T. KEVIN WALKER Managing Editor

KAY STULTZ Production Supervisor



Mr. Marvtastic Larry Leon Hamlin.

Photo by Kevin Walker

We need a black theater museum



Ernie Pitt
This & That

Last week we threw out the idea to the Marvtastic curator of the arts, Larry Leon Hamlin, that he should begin to organize an effort to construct a museum here. We suggested then and do so again that the museum house artifacts and memorabilia charting the beginning, growth and future of black theater. It was certainly obvious to me that such a place is needed.

We talk about how vital tourism is to the city, but we rarely talk about ways to attract visitors. Last week was a glaring example of how black theater can impact our town. Thousands of visitors from around the country, even from abroad, flocked to Winston-Salem for the National Black Theatre Festival to experience what many do not have the opportunity to experience in their own towns: black actors, writers, producers, directors and black plays.

It was covered by national and international media outlets.

This festival, founded and headed by "Sir Hamlin," as our guest editorial writer called him, has put Winston-Salem on the map. Now the

city, county and state need to step up to the plate and support the festival in a way that will ensure its success and longevity.

We also suggested last week that perhaps the state secretary of cultural resources could be instrumental in this effort. I am suggesting that Sir Hamlin get a group of people together and put a National Black Theatre Museum Committee together for the purpose of beginning the process. As I'm sure you know, everything is a process. Part of the process is buy-in. You have to get key individuals to buy into the idea in order to get the ball rolling.

I know for a fact that there are influential people here who would welcome a call from Sir Hamlin in this regard. I hope that Larry will make those calls and invite those persons who are on the sidelines to join him in this effort.

One must be mindful, however, of the different personalities in this town that often clash. It may be difficult to get some people together at the same table, but we must keep our eyes on the prize, not the individuals. I hope and pray that we can do that. And I encourage Larry to begin to open dialogue on the subject. God bless you. Amen.

Ernie Pitt is the publisher of The Chronicle. E-mail him at erpitt@wschronicle.com.

Submit letters and columns to:

Chronicle Mailbag,
P.O. Box 1636,
Winston-Salem, NC 27102



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Letters to the Editor

Marvtastic Winston-Salem

To the Editor:

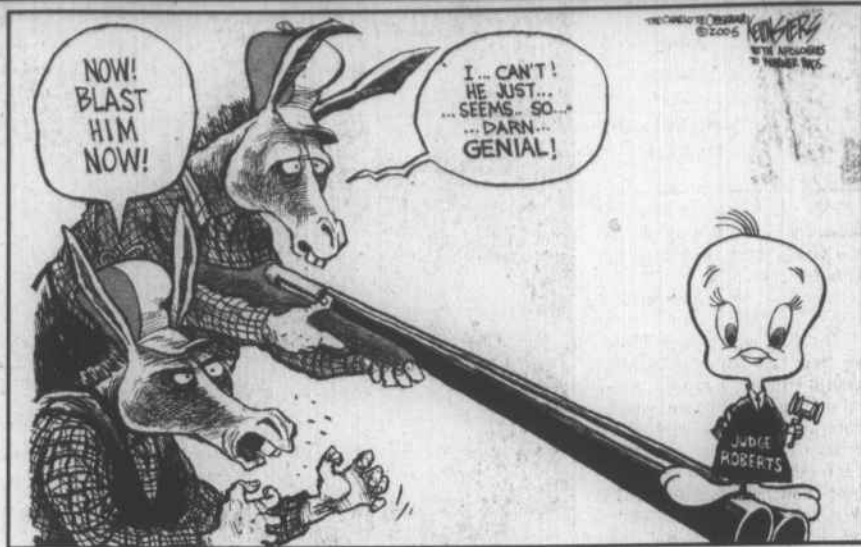
As a citizen of Winston-Salem, I would like to applaud Mayor Allen Joines, Don Flow and all the others involved for having the vision of attracting Dell Computer to Forsyth County. These men and women are to be applauded for their hard work and perseverance. Their ability to attract Dell Computer to this community will have a lasting economic impact on our community. Joines works hard and diligently to make this community one which we can be proud of.

I would also like to applaud Larry "Marvtastic" Leon Hamlin for the great work that he has done for our community. He had a vision in 1979 to coordinate a National Black Theater Art Festival in Winston-Salem. There were skeptics who said it couldn't be done, but Hamlin pressed on in spite of all odds.

Hamlin is working diligently with the local magnet schools to help the students improve their self-esteem through poetry and drama.

Hamlin is including all ethnic groups for participation in the festival.

It is a blessing to have these hardworking visionaries as part of our community. These men are striving to improve the social, cultural and economic lives of all the citizens of Forsyth County.



Paul L. Hazel
Winston-Salem

City Council

To the Editor:

I read Ernie Pitt's "This & That" piece in Thursday's Chronicle, and I generally agree with your position. However, the attitude of indifference on the part of the council extends to virtually all of the citizens of the city except for the select few that are considered "insiders."

The City Council has lost touch with its constituents and its ultimate source of power - the voters. This is not a racial thing; it is the arrogance of unchecked

power and crosses racial, economic and social lines.

I regularly attend City Council meetings and speak on many issues (Dell and other corporate incentives, equal opportunity and respect to all citizens, to name a few), and when I do, I too get the bored look of indifference from the council. And by the way, Mr. Pitt, it's not just me, it's not just you, it's happening to everybody they don't agree with.

Like you, I don't know the specifics of the Webster or Green cases, but I do know the council was not the least bit interested in responding to them. I would be!

This year, people of good faith who want to return control of the

City Council to the voters will have an opportunity to make some different choices. I will be one of those choices. There will be others as well. If you truly believe that new faces are needed in city government, please consider me as a possible choice.

We will agree on some issues and disagree on others. That is the nature of the world. But I promise you this: I will always try to do what is right for the citizens of Winston-Salem. My personal honor demands that I do no less.

Sincerely,
Richard Norman
Candidate for Winston-Salem
City Council (North Ward)

'Winsome sailing' in Winston-Salem



Bernadine M. Duncan

Guest Columnist

I just left Winston-Salem and it wasn't Winston-Salem at all. Contradictory? Yes. But true. Here's another contradiction. I enjoyed myself so much I left early. Let me explain.

When I drove into downtown Winston-Salem for the National Black Theatre Festival, it was like arriving at the dock to step onto a luxury ocean liner about to set sail to magical unknown ports.

Moving through the city and just looking at the people arriving promised a weeklong trip that would be surreal, ethereal and, well, a bit like Oz. For example, I knew I was in the geographical space usually occupied by the tobacco town of Winston-Salem, but it wasn't that Winston-Salem anymore.

I felt pleasant anxiety. As I approached downtown, I noticed that all cross streets leading to this mecca of theater, music, poetry and camaraderie had been renamed National Black Theater Boulevard. It was like driving across numerous yellow brick roads that all led to the glitter and glamour of the festival.

Completing this feeling of moving within an alternate reality was the banner stretched across the street welcoming guests with a picture of its creator: the purple wizard with the blue depression-glass spectacles (think sort of a cross between Prince and Elton John), Larry Leon Hamlin.

I felt honored to participate in his dream.

When I got there, celebrities were already in their glittering gowns and tuxedos awaiting the limousines that would take them to the gala. We commoners stood around watching and photographing them as they waited. They smiled at us in a manner that made each of us feel that they were as happy to see us as we were them. All of us, celebrities, people visiting from around the country and, I suspect, the world, and those from the community all seemed to be happy just to be in the mix.

The great part for me was how strangers became instant friends who were intent on experiencing this trip together, whether it was a meal, seeing or critiquing one of the many plays, reading parts in the script sessions, or reciting or listening to poetry in the open mike sessions.

This was not the type of journey where anyone had to waste time getting to know his or her



Photo by Jason Pitt

Helena Lewis and Malcolm-Jamal Warner host one of the Midnight Poetry Jams.

fellow travelers; there were spontaneous friendships because we all had something in common: We were African-Americans in a Southern city at a black theater festival for us, by us, starring us, so there were no strangers. Me? I was smiling at anyone who caught my eye and talking to anyone who even paused close to me.

I felt connected, too conversational, and ecstatic.

Now, I want to talk about how I felt as an African-American woman with dreadlocks from a city where my daughters and I are still a bit different from those with the permanents, hot combs, weaves and press-on hair. At this festival, we are in our element. I would come just to walk among the majestic, beautiful women with their natural hair, swaying (often ample) hips, and creatively unique styles. I've never experienced it in such abundance anywhere else.

I felt related to women of distinction, and I loved being one of them.

More warm feelings seem to rise in me because of how everyone from all walks of life embraced each other. This year, in my opinion, more so than at the past two festivals I attended, there

was more involvement from the teenagers and other members of the Winston-Salem community. Teenagers from the city and the renowned Carver High School sat around outside the Adam's Mark/Marriott Hotel mingling with the "out-of-town" kids, and many sat around the lobby, just inhaling the atmosphere and becoming a part of the ambience.

Who knows, one day, this experience may produce young actors, playwrights, or producers. Because of this festival, whether they actually saw a play or not, they know it's possible, and that's enough to plant a dream.

An especially beautiful sight were the campers - they looked to be between 5 and 7 years old - lined up outside the host hotel in their yellow camper T-shirts waiting to go in for one of the children's activities. Absolutely nothing can make me smile more than wiggling, prancing, unable-to-stand-still kids in a line anxious to see what experience life will give them next. Also, knowing that the purple wizard had made sure it would be magical and special made me silently bless Sir Hamlin for thinking of everyone, young and old.

Perhaps the most powerful

lesson I learned from the people attending this festival was not to ever place boundaries on myself. There were people in their 80s staying up to 2:30 a.m. reading plays and attending poetry readings. There were old and younger people in wheelchairs, with canes and walkers having a ball. They were in the midst of all activities. For me, they were role models. Like the kids, teenagers, celebrities, worldly guests, and local sophisticates and observers, they didn't want to miss this special time in the midst of creativity and culture, where all senses were heightened. Disabilities and frailties be damned they wanted to sail on this ship and if they could live with these "problems" at home, they could live with them here.

I felt a deep, reverent respect. In the end, I left the festival two days early. Initially, I started to change my plans and stay longer. However, on the first night, I attended the wonderful gala and saw the legendary Ruby Dee, among others, and experienced my only disappointment of the festival, the cutting short of "The Jackie Wilson Story." Two evenings earlier, I had seen the thoroughly entertaining "Freeda Peoples" and shared a table with blues diva Linda Hopkins.

One night earlier, I had shopped and bought things from vendors I could never find anywhere else; had experienced the brilliance of Daniel Beaty in the play "Emergence-SEE!," a phenomenon that surely has miles to rise; and had traveled to the very edge of intimacy (or to some, decency) with the "3 Blaque Chix: 'Herotica.'" In actuality, I had to exit prematurely because my older sister couldn't stand the "heat." And I couldn't stop laughing at her modesty.

In addition, over my three days there, I visited with very special friends, encountered a student I taught eight years ago who is now grown, beautiful and successful, and shared quality time with my daughter, who will leave home for her freshman year at UNC Chapel Hill in three weeks. I decided I was way past sensory overload and perhaps I should stop and savor the experience.

I know there were more people to meet, plays to see, restaurants and art shops and vendors to visit, but I didn't want to risk the magic I had experienced. I didn't want to see people packing up and suitcases lining the lobby. I didn't want to see the convention hall cleared and people striking sets. I wanted to winsomely sail away before Winston-Salem became Winston-Salem again.

I felt satisfied.

Bernadine M. Duncan, a native of Greensboro, teaches journalism at a high school in Virginia Beach, Va.