

OPINION/ FORUM

THE CHRONICLE

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John Amos in "Halley's Comet," one of this year's NBTF productions.

NBTF Time!

It is almost National Black Theatre Festival Time again, and we hope that the rest of the community is just as excited about that as we are.

This will be a special NBTF. The event is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. It is hard to believe that it was only in 1989 that the late, great Larry Leon Hamlin launched the ambitious event. He was still a relative newcomer to the local arts scene (his N.C. Black Repertory Company was only 10-years-old then) when he started the NBTF. It is a marvel that it has had such strong legs and arms wide enough to embrace artists and productions from all across the world.

It can't be easy to stage this event without the colorful Mr. Hamlin around. He was the NBTF, after all. But the show went on brilliantly in 2007, just a few weeks after his death, and we have confidence that Hamlin's hand-picked team will give us another festival to remember.

The Chronicle's NBTF Special Section will hit the streets this weekend and will be inserted into papers next Thursday. To get a look at the section before anyone else, go to our Web site, www.wschronicle.com, on Monday.

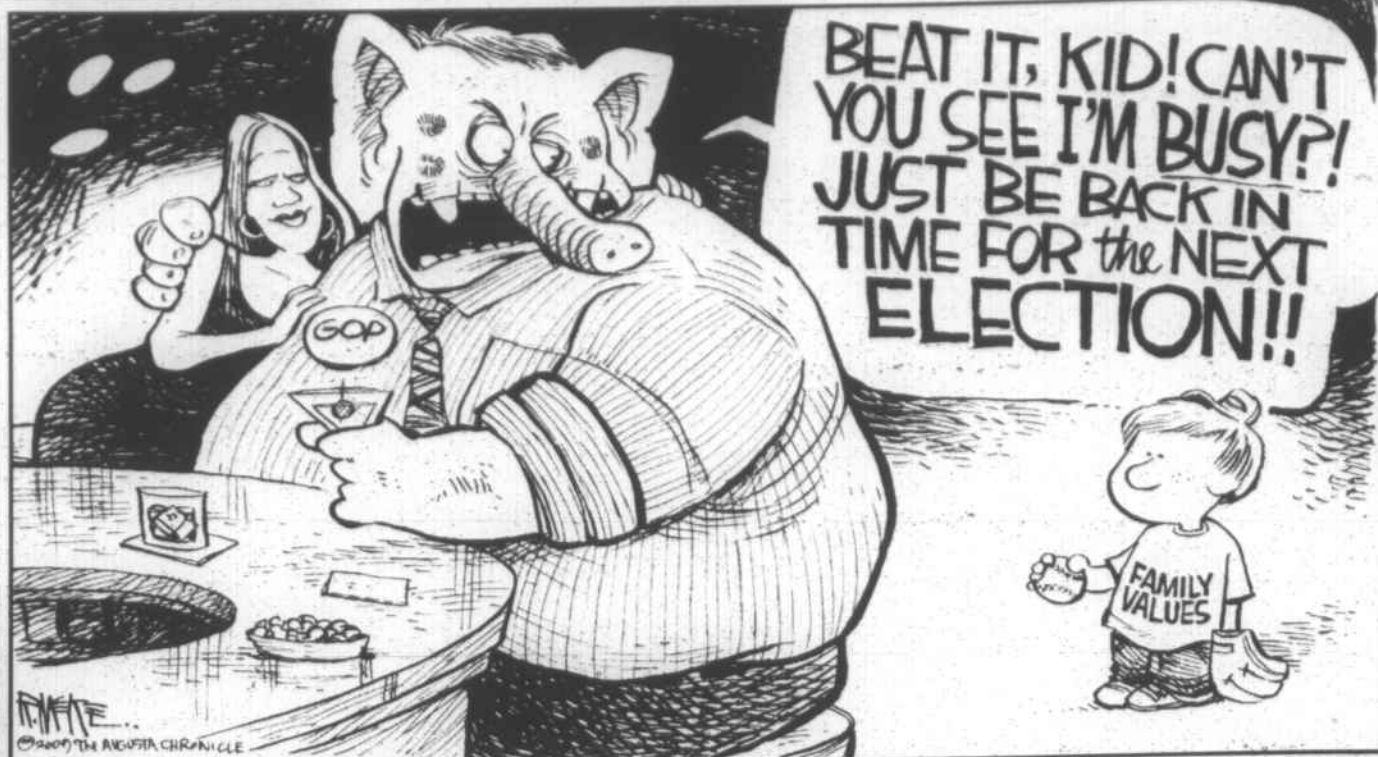
The section profiles each of the productions that will be staged this year and includes lots of other information. We can tell you that the talent coming to town will blow you away. Each show has been carefully hand-picked by NBTF officials and they did a heck of a job! They have selected productions that entertain and educate; that will make us laugh and cry. It is all on its way to a stage near you. Please, please support the festival by buying tickets to some of the productions. It will be money well-spent. Trust us.

Submit letters and columns to:

Chronicle Mailbag,
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Please print clearly. Typed letters and columns are preferred. If you are writing a guest column, please include a photo of yourself. We reserve the right to edit any item submitted for clarity or brevity. You also can e-mail us your letters or columns at: news@wschronicle.com.



What Michael Jackson gave the world



Candice Benbow
 Guest Columnist

It is July 7, 2009. Aside from celebrating my best friend's second wedding anniversary, I am celebrating the life of Michael Joseph Jackson. I got dressed. I did my hair. I put on makeup and I waited, patiently, for the final goodbye to begin. Those who could not converge on Los Angeles, California were in front of a television like I was. There were those who gathered for corporate solace; some watched in the privacy of their own homes. There were those who streamed from their computer screens or grabbed glimpses in the break room at work. I chose to watch with my mother, the one who introduced me to his music, beside me and my grandmother available by telephone for every moment of laughter and remembrance. Though I never met him, I felt as if I had lost an important person in my life. And I was not alone; all over the world, people were hurting because one so special to them

was gone. All over the world. All over the world. All over the world.

In my lifetime, I will remember two times when the world stood still and became unified. I will remember when the world stopped and united to witness the first African-American President of the United States take office on January 21, 2009. And I will remember, today, when the world stopped and united to honor the legacy of a man whose music defied time and space. On both occasions, it did not matter our color, our origin, our faith or our belief. It did not matter how much money we had or how much education we possessed. We were one. In January, our triumph was the same. In July, our anguish was also.

Through the tears, my mother asked a poignant question. "Why are we all sad?" Though, in some ways, I believe our grief comes from the shock of a life gone too soon, I also believe our grief is born out of our own guilt. In many ways, we did this to Michael. Whether it was through an obsession to idolize him or an obsession to document his every move or an obsession to ridicule him or an obsession to laugh at jokes at

his expense, our love for Michael may at times have been misconstrued. Did we appreciate him for who he truly was or only for what he could offer us? Did we just enjoy his music or did we listen to the message he gave us in it? Michael Jackson was not just a musical legend and icon. He was a modern day prophet who made us aware of times to come through his melodies. Did we heed his call? Did we look at the man in the mirror? Have we recognized ourselves as siblings? I believe we did, today, as we said goodbye to our brother.

Michael went through many changes in his lifetime, much of which evolved from a need to belong and our laughter at him made it no better. However, for the first time today, I saw things differently. Just as he did musically, Michael Jackson physically transcended color. Everyone could identify with him. Though a source of great pain for him, perhaps that was Michael's greatest gift to us. In a time where we are threatened by possible nuclear activity, in a time where children are still being sold into slavery, in a time where war rages on, in a time where despair abounds because of financial ruin, we looked past color and came

together. If we can do that today, when our hearts are most heavy, imagine what we can do tomorrow, when our hearts have been lifted.

So let us learn from Michael. Let our works speak for us. Let them tell the message we wish to convey. Let us believe that we can leave this world better than how we lived in it. God blessed Michael with a gift and he shared it; and when his purpose was fulfilled, he returned home to his Father. But we still remain. Each of us has been blessed with a God given gift to enhance His kingdom and, dare I say, heal the world. What will you do with the opportunity? May the lives that we lead be ones that reflect gratitude for and responsibility to the purpose for which we're called. Rest now, Michael Joseph Jackson, knowing you did just that.

Candice Benbow is a native of Winston-Salem and sociology graduate student at North Carolina Central University. A freelance writer, Candice pens "Preparing For Purpose" devotionals that are read by subscribers across the country and abroad weekly. She may be contacted at candicarienbenbow@gmail.com.

Obama at the NAACP



Ron Walter
 Guest Columnist

Well, despite what we hear to be something of a struggle within his administration about how close President Barack Obama should be to the African-American community, he showed up at the 100th Anniversary of the NAACP and showed out.

At some points in his speech, I couldn't tell who Obama was and who Ben Jealous, the new CEO, was, as Obama turned country preacher and got busy, giving the organization its marching orders.

He said that Blacks had made extraordinary progress, but there are still the barriers of HIV/AIDS, disproportionate imprisonment, unemployment and health care. He seemed to understand that in eliminating those structural inequalities, there was a balance between what he could do and what the Black community might do. So, he talked about fixing the economy and health care reform, but featured his initiatives on education. He gave the impression that "No Child Left Behind" was left behind, not mentioning it once, and changed the inference that the state of our school "is an African American problem" but an American problem that is the responsibility of our leaders.

In that vein, he wants to strengthen community colleges to bear more of the challenge of job training, institute a "race to the top" fund to give learning incentive to children



President Obama speaks to NAACP members.

in public schools and pilot programs that feature innovative college preparation.

I liked his urging for us to elevate more examples of professional excellence in fields other than athletics and entertainment as the basis for educational achievement.

True to form, he returned to the familiar theme of personal responsibility. But this time I noticed that the audience seemed somewhat weary. Perhaps it is because most Blacks have climbed up the rough side of the mountain and have mostly been very responsible considering the tremendous odds they have faced. They therefore, may be growing tired of the preaching and expect that someone with a large White House megaphone would also remind America of this fact.

Nevertheless, while he presented both halves of the balance of responsibility to energize Black progress, both in government the Black community, the private sector seldom gets included (except by those who discuss Reparations)

while it has the largest responsibility as providers of critical resources such as housing, employment and wealth.

He could have said more about this in reforming the economy, by sending some of that TARP money to community banks to expand credit for depressed neighborhoods.

The opportunity to have said more about the private sector responsibility was missed even though Obama's NAACP speech was given on the very day the Senate was discussing his nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and the major highlight of those hearings was the Ricci case featuring Affirmative Action.

Although Obama may have been advised to take a pass because his advisers believed that an errant comment by him could have been damaging to the judge, an NAACP audience still needed to hear that Affirmative Action was not dead, that it is still needed and that his Administration was committed to it.

I liked the strategy that Obama laid out, which gave the NAACP the role of making the White House do what is right, in other words, being the legitimate protagonist for an agenda of civil and human rights. It strikes me that is the right posture, not just for a Black president but for any president, as was discussed during the campaign about his fidelity to the Black Agenda.

But being a protagonist at a time when there is a history-making event such as a popular Black man sitting in the White House takes courage and thus far, little courage has been shown by any of the Black leadership.

Maybe that is because when you attempt to broach the issue of accountability, even by accident, you are disbarred from the black community - ask Rev. Jesse Jackson, Tavis Smiley, and others.

Will the NAACP be up to the role of the legitimate protagonist? I don't know because historically, it has also depended upon access to the White House as a currency of its leadership, and that currency could be eroded by the alienation that naturally comes from strong opposition.

So, maybe this is not just a role for the NAACP, but all of our organizations to take seriously the task of "tough love" toward the administration, a role that gives strong support when it is right on our issues and strong opposition when the need is clearly there, but nothing happens. What more can anyone ask?

Dr. Ron Walters is Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland College Park. His latest book is "The Price of Racial Reconciliation."