

Notes



Photo by Kevin Walker

Talented performers Asia Toney, Kierre Bjorn and Tamelia Pankey.

Local talent shines

"The Eve of Jackie" star Chester Gregory is giving a trio of local singers the opportunity of a lifetime.

Gifted vocalists Asia Toney, Kierre Bjorn and Tamelia Pankey are providing background vocals for Gregory as he performs "The Eve of Jackie" throughout Festival week. Gregory announced at a pre-Festival event in June that Bjorn – a talented Winston-Salem-based gospel singer and actor in his own right, would be joining him on stage. Pankey, also a Winston-Salem resident, said that Bjorn then recruited her and Greensboro's Toney. Bjorn knows both women through his involvement in the Triad's burgeoning music scene.

"As performers, this is what we live for: to be on the stage," said Pankey, who said she had no nerves about performing before a sold-out crowd at the Stevens Center Monday night.

No jitters were apparent Monday afternoon either as the three joined Gregory on a celebrity-filled podium to perform a song during the NBTF kick off media conference.

Personal connection

Dr. Felecia Piggott-Long hosted a pre-NBTF gathering at her home Saturday with a very special guest of honor – Cedrina Baugh.

This week, Festival-goers are watching Baugh in "Crowns" play a character – Yolanda – that is based on Piggott-Long.

"Crowns," the blockbuster gospel musical, was first a bestselling book by Craig Marberry and Michael Cunningham, who were both residents of the Triad when they released the book in 2000 to celebrate the tradition of black women wearing hats to church. Most of the women interviewed and photographed for "Crowns" live right here in the Triad. It was the poignancy of Piggott-Long's real-life story – one that revolves around how she coped with the 1991 murder of her brother – that led actress/playwright Regina Taylor to center her musical around it.



Piggott-Long

Piggott attended the world premiere of the stage production more than a decade ago and has since seen the musical staged around the country by at least 10 different theater companies, including the stellar show that the N.C. Black Repertory Co. is staging this week. But she says the first time she saw an actor portraying her late brother, she was overcome with emotion.

"It was very shocking to see a physical representation of my brother, Kermit, for the first time after his death," she said. "The first time I saw him singing to Yolanda 'Oh Mary, Don't You Weep,' I had to leave the theater house and get myself together."

Piggott-Long, an educator, playwright and author whose titles include "The North Carolina Black Repertory Company: The First 25 Years," says the book and musical has helped her family heal from the tragedy, so much so that the Piggott family recently signed a letter from a parole board consenting to the early release of the man who killed Kermit Piggott.

"Our family had to make a decision to release the emotion of hate toward the neighbor who murdered Kermit," she said. "(The neighbor) had four children to raise. Keeping him behind bars would not bring our brother back."

Emerging Talent

At 27, Jonathan McCrory is already being hailed as a rising star in the theater world.

The National Black Theatre Festival bestowed the Emerging Producer Award upon McCrory, a writer, director and actor, during its Opening Night Gala Monday. McCrory is the founder of The Movement Theatre Company and co-founder of the Harlem 9 Collective.



Staff Photo

"I'm fortunate to be collided, throughout my life, with people who push my pendulum forward ... to a place where I am under a new paradigm," the Washington, D.C. native said when asked about his meteoric rise. "I feel very fortunate, very humbled and very proud to be at this place in my career."

This fall, McCrory, who holds a BFA in Acting and Africana Studies from New York University Tisch School of the Arts, is slated to take on the role of director of the Theatre Arts program at Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre Institute of Action Arts. The Harlem-based company is staging "Iced-Out, Shackled & Chained" at this year's festival.

McCrory, who is attending the NBTF for the second time, said the festival lives up to the nickname "Black Theatre Holy Ground," and he plans to spread the word about what he calls "a sacred space" to other young stars in the field.

"I'm in a sacred space and that sacred space should be given its due respect within that context," he said. "It's something that we have to figure out how to bottle up and make sure that it's something that my generation supports. I think that's the next frontier."

Rain's World

Actress credits her fearless spirit to her famous father

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

Although she grew up immersed in the industry, Rain Pryor discovered early on that Hollywood players weren't tripping over themselves to cast someone like her in their projects.

The child of African American comedian/actor Richard Pryor and Jewish dancer Shelley Bonis, Rain says the industry has never been able to look beyond her appearance.

"I didn't look black enough to be black; I wasn't white enough to be white," she said.

Some roles did come. She joined the cast of "Head of the Class" in 1989, playing tough chick "T.J." She was also a regular on Showtime's "Rude Awakening" and made memorable appearances on network dramas like "The Division" and "Chicago Hope." But then came a period when her phone stopped ringing. Rather than fret, she dug deep into her creativity.

"I was not being cast in Hollywood, so I decided to create something for myself," she said.

That something was "Fried Chicken and Latkes," a rollicking biographical one-woman show that has been winning over fans and critics alike for 15 years now. A longtime Off-Broadway staple, "Fried Chicken and Latkes" is making its National Black Theatre Festival debut this week, fulfilling a dream Rain's had since 2003, when she first submitted the show for NBTF consideration.

"It wasn't ... accepted,



Staff Photo

Rain Pryor speaks at an NBTF news conference Monday.

but this time, they called and actually invited me," she said.

Throughout the show, Rain morphs into the people who shaped and molded her. She unabashedly lays bare racial stereotypes and cultural biases.

"Politically correct means we don't actually want to talk about (race), but I think politically correct should be calling a spade a spade – literally, and then let's discuss why we are calling a spade a spade. Let's talk about that elephant in the room that is sitting there," she said.

Rain said she inherited her father's honesty gene, as well as his big mouth. Both traits have served her well in terms of "Fried Chicken and Latkes," which will return to the Off-Broadway stage soon after its NBTF

run. "My dad being who he is was one who never held back the truth, so all I know how to do is that," Rain said.

She is excited about staging her show at the NBTF and is grateful that Festival organizers realized that there is room at the table for a story like hers.

"My story is a part of the African American diaspora, even though I am multi-racial. I think that is a part of who we are," said the actress, who stays centered and grounded by embracing tenants of the African Yorùbá faith.

Rain believes her on-stage success is a ringing endorsement of self-love and self-acceptance.

"I don't care that Hollywood says you have to be this. I am going to be who I am. Being who

you are works," she said.

When the actress is not on stage or busy raising her daughter, she carries the baton for Multiple Sclerosis research as an ambassador for the National MS Society. The cause is a personal one for Rain. Her father lived with MS for three decades before his 2005 death.

"For me, finding a cure is the ultimate feat," she said. "It is something I have to do."

"Fried Chicken and Latkes" will be staged today (Thursday, Aug. 1) at 8 p.m.; Friday, Aug. 2 at 8 p.m.; and Saturday, Aug. 3 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. at the Reese Theatre in the Embassy Suites. Tickets are \$40 and available at the Benton Convention Center Box Office or at the venue prior to the show.

Young filmmaker leaves an impression

BY LAYLA GARMIS
THE CHRONICLE

UNCSA alumnus Shakim Coleman screened his first post-graduation film Tuesday at the Central Library during the National Black Theatre Festival Film Fest.



The piece, which Coleman dubbed "2-Way Street," explores the inner conflict a young man experiences when he is forced to make the difficult choice between avenging his cousin/mentor's murder or returning to school to secure a better future.

"The message I want to give is that once you choose the street life, there's only two ways out," he said, "death or jail."

Viewers offered feedback following the noon-time screening.

"I liked your message," one woman said. "... I loved the way that it ended because it gave you

hope." Some of the audience members took exception to the characters' use of the word "nigga," a term prevalent throughout the film. Though it may be offensive to some, Coleman said its use lent authenticity to the dialogue.

He should know. The film and its characters were derived from things he experienced growing up in an urban environment, Coleman revealed.

"I came from the same background," he said. "I was lucky to be exposed to other things."



Staff Photo

Horace Vincent Rogers, a N.C. A&T State University alumnus and Larry Leon Hamlin protégé, performs "Make Them Hear You" from "Ragtime" at the Opening Night Gala.

Hamlin

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which seeks to "expose the beauty and complexity of the inherited theatre work of our African American ancestors and to take this work to a higher level into the 21st century and beyond," hosts its annual conference in Winston-Salem every other year, to coincide with the NBTF. It will now present the Hamlin Award every two years.

"Today is a very special one in that we celebrate the legacy of Larry Leon Hamlin, the founder of the North Carolina Black Repertory Company – the first professional black theatre company in all of North Carolina – and the National Black Theatre Festival," said BTN President Michael Dinwiddie.

Sprinkle-Hamlin, who had worked behind the scenes at the festival and the Black Rep since their inceptions, stepped to the forefront six years ago, setting aside her own grief to insure that her husband's legacy would live on. Many had questioned whether the biennial festival, which celebrated its 20th year in 2009, would survive in the absence of its flamboyant founder, whose charisma and vision had attracted thousands to the city for decades, but Sprinkle-Hamlin has proven her critics wrong.

"We have come in the past because of Larry Leon Hamlin," said Dinwiddie, an associate professor of individualized study at New York University. "But now we come because of the torch that Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin carries, the torch



Photo by Kevin Walker

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin poses with actress Debbi Morgan outside of the Benton Convention Center Monday night.

that has made possible the continuation of Larry Leon Hamlin's vision."

Sprinkle-Hamlin, who also serves as director of the Forsyth County Public Library system, said she was honored to receive the award.

"It's an awesome feeling. It makes you feel good to know that you're appreciated and that people recognize what you're doing," the Tobaccoville native said. "It's a lot of glamour but it's a lot of hard work as well."

Since taking the helm, Sprinkle-Hamlin says she has worked to broaden the festival and reparatory compa-

ny's audience, trumpeting the mantra "Black Theatre is for Everyone" at every turn.

"Our mission is to introduce theatre to everyone because theatre is life," she remarked. "... That has been my goal, to get out into the whole community and say, 'Come, you can learn something.' We stick to our mission, and I think that's why we've been successful."

The trio of Black Rep Executive Director Gerry Patton, Artistic Director Mabel Robinson and Sprinkle-Hamlin have been able to not only continue staging the festival without a hiccup, but have even helped it to grow. Sprinkle-Hamlin said she expects this year's festival to be one of the biggest yet.

"We have a core group of people who, through thick and thin, have stuck by us and who believe in the mission, and I think that's what's kept us going," she commented. "I think we have changed somewhat in how we conduct business. We have had to really go out into the community and tell our story, and now people are starting to buy into our story."

Sprinkle-Hamlin said that she hoped the legacy of the company, the festival and its founder would be a source of inspiration for others who want to chase their dreams.

"I want people to know that I believe in us and I feel that if you have a dream, you can accomplish whatever that dream is," she said. "I want people to know that it's not about fame, it's not about fortune, but it's about what you believe in."