

# Soap star creating her own opportunities

BY T. KEVIN WALKER  
THE CHRONICLE

Some may call it biting the hand that feeds you, but Victoria Rowell views it as pushing open the doors of opportunity.

The actress had for years been a staple on "The Young and the Restless" — by far the most popular daytime drama among African Americans — when she took on her bosses by demanding that they hire behind-the-scenes talent that mirrors the show's viewing audiences.

In 2011, Rowell lobbied the National Urban League to her cause. The growing pressure forced the powers-that-be to bring trailblazing writer Susan Dansby — a four-time Emmy winner — and director Albert Alarr, onboard at "Y&R."

"We are still marching for the first black producer," a spirited Rowell said Tuesday at a National Black Theatre Festival news conference.

Rowell's battle for diversity on the show has not left her unscarred. She announced on Twitter late last year that the future of her character, Dru Winters, was in limbo as a result, she claims, of rubbing CBS and Sony executives the wrong way with her activism.

"Sony TV Sr VP Steve Kent stated Friday that bringing back character Dru Winters is not the creative direction 'Young & Restless' is going in," she



Victoria Rowell walks into the gala.

tweeted last October. "Head of Diversity at CBS Josie Thomas asks if I can find work (with) another Network? CBS helmer Leslie Moonves does not want me affiliated."

Rowell said Tuesday that, like generations of African Americans have done before her, she has not let her separation from the network — which she had been affiliated with for more than two decades — break her.

"We have to suit-up, get-up and keep going," she said.

She has done just that. Her book deal with Simon & Schuster imprint Atria Books has produced two bestsellers — "The Young and the Ruthless" and "Secrets of a Soap Opera



A fan places cash into Rowell's basket.

Diva." Though the books are fiction, Rowell's soap star cred gives the titles an air of authenticity.

The actress, whose big screen credits include "The Distinguished Gentleman," "Eve's Bayou" and "Dumb and Dumber," is also gearing-up to produce her very own soap opera, "The Rich and the Ruthless."

Filming is slated to start this month. In the meantime, Rowell is raising money to make the show a reality. A Kickstarter.com campaign has been launched. Rowell got a little closer to the campaign's \$50,000 goal Tuesday after she brazenly passed around a donation basket among those seated at the NBTF presser.

"If you can buy those Procter & Gamble (the top corporate sponsor of "The Young and the Restless") products, then you can put a dollar in that basket," Rowell told the crowd with a grin.

Donate to the campaign by going to <http://www.kickstarter.com> and searching for "Victoria Rowell."



This year's NBTF is international, thanks, partly, to the young men and women of TROIKA, a Bermuda-based performance troupe. The youngsters are performing "Misunderstood," a choreoplay in which the young cast explores their purpose in life and much more. They are staging the acclaimed show this week at the Benton Convention Center. The youngsters themselves co-wrote the show, along with N.C. native Lawrence Floyd (back row, fourth from left), who also directs.

## NBTF youth component still going strong

BY LAYLA GARMIS  
THE CHRONICLE

Area youngsters officially kicked-off their portion of the National Black Theatre Festival Tuesday with a spirited program known as the Youth/Celebrity Project at Embassy Suites' Garden Terrace.

Nana Malaya, AKA "The Dancing Diplomat," regaled the youth with African songs, even teaching them some African dance moves from her own repertoire. Malaya, an actress, dancer, songstress, storyteller, poet and writer — among other things — is a Festival veteran.

Her son, actor Lamman Rucker, star of films like "Why Did I Get Married?" and a 2011 NBTF celebrity co-chair, joked during the last NBTF that he had been "baptized and indoctrinated" as a festival-goer at an early age.

An alumna of August Wilson's first theatre company, "The Black Horizon Theatre," Malaya's performance have been a staple of the Youth/Celebrity Project, which was co-founded by Cleopatra Solomon and Cynthia Mack in 1993.

During Tuesday's performance, Malaya solicited volunteers from the crowd, allowing them to demonstrate the simple dance moves alongside her as she sang the familiar African folk song "Funga Alafia."

Solomon, who retired from her post as vice president of Program Operations at the Winston-Salem Urban League in 2007, said the programs are designed to be both enlightening and entertaining for their



Nana Malaya leads kids in a dance.

young attendees.

"We want them to be introduced to the world of art and know that there are ways that they can express themselves that are positive, ways that they can pursue positive careers," said the mother of one.

Christina Banks, 15, served as a volunteer alongside her cousin Raychel Peebles, 16, and friend, Raven Hawkins, 14, Tuesday. Christina, a rising junior at Walkertown High School, said she attended the festival with a summer camp when she was a child herself, and said she hoped the students at the 2013 Festival would get as much from their experience as she once did.

"I hope they will learn something from it," she said.

LaTonya McIver, director of United Metropolitan Ministries' Camp Discovery, brought 31 youngsters out to take part in the program.

"We try to bring them to as many community events as possible," she said.

Nine-year-old Anesu Nyakudya

experienced the festival for the first time through Camp Discovery this week.

"I think it might be fun because it's a theater for black people to perform," Anesu said.

Her friend, Alaysia Munoz said she sees the festival as a chance for people to come together.

"I think it's about bringing different colored people together and having a festival," the eight year-old surmised.

McIver, whose students took in a parade on Fifth Street before venturing into the Embassy Suites, said she plans to bring them back to take part in youth focused activities all week long.

"I think it's a shame for camps and other organizations to not take advantage of this opportunity to bring the kids," she said, noting that many people had traveled from far and wide to be a part of the festival that was taking place in their own backyard. "We're right here, so we should take this opportunity."

## Notes



Chester Gregory performs at Monday's news conference.

## De Shields Doesn't Mince Words

If you don't want the truth or a bruised ego, then don't ask stage legend Andre DeShields for his opinion.

There was a funny aside during Monday's NBTF kickoff press conference as "The Eve of Jackie" star Chester Gregory recalled his first appearance at the NBTF in 2001, when he first played singer Jackie Wilson in a Black Ensemble Theater production. He was so stellar then that NBTF Founder Larry Leon Hamlin predicted that he would be on Broadway by the time the 2003 NBTF rolled around.

De Shields, however, wasn't convinced. "He told me I wasn't ready for Broadway," Gregory said with a smile as De Shields, seated nearby, laughed.

Gregory said he used both Hamlin and De Shields' words as motivation. Gregory was, in fact, busy starring in the Broadway production of "Hairspray" when the '03 Festival took place. He has since starred in Broadway stagings of "Sister Act" and "Tarzan."

"I'm here only because of the power of belief," he said.

De Shields, a Broadway icon with more than three decades of success under his belt, was eventually given a turn at the mic. He spent a few moments clarifying why he told Gregory to temper his Broadway ambitions.

"I don't want people thinking I am a mean old man," said De Shields, who explained that young performers need tough love so that they will raise their games. In show business, African Americans get only a few chances to shine, De Shields said, and a failure by one could be seen as a setback for all black entertainers.

"We have to be twice as much to get half as much," said the Tony nominee and Emmy winner. "You can't be tame about this journey. (Chester) took it seriously, and he has excelled."



Lawrence Evans holds his award.

## Unexpected Tribute

The more than one dozen people who received awards during Monday's Opening Night Gala had ample time to prepare their acceptance speeches. NBTF Celebrity Coordinator Lawrence Evans personally called each of the honorees to inform them of their awards.

But no one informed Evans that he would need an acceptance speech of his own.

Evans was pleasantly surprised and visibly moved when his name was called as the recipient of this year's Founder's Award, an honor given to the NBTF's most devoted supporters. An acolyte of the late Larry Leon Hamlin, Evans cut his teeth as an actor at Hamlin's N.C. Black Repertory Co. The Forest, Miss. native and Jackson State University alum is one of the driving forces behind the NBTF's success.

As celebrity coordinator, he is tasked with arranging details — both big and small — for the scores of performers and notable invited guests who attend the Festival. The job is so intense that Evans leaves his home in New York City about two months before it begins to hunker-down in Winston-Salem. It is all well worth it, says Evans, who works as a casting consultant when he is not acting or wearing his celebrity coordinator hat.

"It was a nice moment," he said of receiving the surprise honor. "I have been with the Festival from the very beginning ... being a part of this is amazing."