

6C

BUSINESS

Oprah-backed Broadway show draws diverse crowd

'The Color Purple' pulls, blacks, whites

By Larry McShane
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The Great White Way is a bit more multihued these days. And it all begins with "The Color Purple."

Audiences for the stage version of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, playing at the 1,718-seat Broadway Theater, are regularly split about 50-50 between blacks and whites — an anomaly in a business where four out of five customers are usually white.



Winfrey

This redefinition of the Broadway crowd comes as the musical, which boasts Oprah Winfrey as its biggest booster, collected 11 Tony nominations and announced plans for a national tour beginning in April 2007.

Only "The Drowsy Chaperone," with 13 nominations, fared better heading into the Tony Awards on June 11.

"We felt strongly that we had a unique opportunity to do something Broadway rarely does: to bring African-Americans to the theater," said Scott Sanders, the show's producer. "We knew if we told the story honestly and truthfully, we really had an opportunity to do that."

On a weekday night inside the theater, the audience filters inside: a mix of blacks and whites, kids in hoodies and older folks in suits and ties, kente cloth alongside leather jackets. Four middle-aged black women settle into Row L as a young man in an oversized football jersey with a "Puerto Rico" logo looks for his seat.

The crowd contradicts the statistics compiled by The League of American Theaters and Producers, Inc. between June 2004 and June 2005. Of the 11.53 million tickets sold over those 12 months, only 3.8 percent were purchased by black theatergoers. Latinos accounted for just 5.7 percent.

These numbers sound right outside the Gershwin Theater, where a largely white crowd gathers before the night's performance of "Wicked." One block away, at the theater named for playwright August Wilson, the same demographic heads inside to see "Jersey Boys."

Things are different at "The Color Purple."

"When we started to put together our marketing plan, we were hoping for African-Americans to make up 10 or 15 percent of the audience," Sanders said. "The fact that we're drawing about 50 percent of the audience, a diversified audience of people who have not been to Broadway, that's really, really exciting."

Despite mixed reviews, "The Color Purple" has become a bit of the people's choice on Broadway. Intense word-of-mouth has fueled its success, along with the backing of Winfrey, who captured an Oscar nomination for her role as Sofia in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation.

Sanders is quick to credit Winfrey's role in getting the word out about a play that delves into incest, rape, child abuse and domestic violence in its tale of a rural Georgia girl's troubled but ultimately triumphant life.

Five months after its opening, "The Color Purple" was grossing more than \$1 million a week, making it one of the top five shows on Broadway.

Grant goes to building tech pool

By Herbert L. White
herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

A \$2 million grant will help UNC Charlotte establish a program to develop a new pool of information technology talent.

The National Science Foundation grant will launch Students and Technology in Academia, Research and Service, a program geared to build computer expertise

among historically underrepresented groups.

Although the U.S. Department of Commerce has been projecting an increase of more than 1.1 million new IT and computing jobs between 2002 and 2012, but fewer white men — who traditionally populate IT departments — are expected to be in the labor force. "The IT industry needs a

diverse range of people with interpersonal skills, not just geeks and coders," said Teresa Dahlberg PhD, an associate professor of computer science at UNCC. We need people who can solve problems; people with soft skills; people who can apply social value to computing."

The STARS alliance is a consortium of 10 universities that include Auburn (Ala.)

University, Florida A&M University, Florida State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Landmark College, Meredith College, N.C. State University, Spelman College and University of South Florida-Lakeland. UNCC will manage development and assessment among alliance schools, which are organized into five regional hubs



Dahlberg



PHOTO: CALVIN FERGUSON

B.B. Dance Productions founder Veronica Badgett is a former choreographer of the Charlotte Hornets. Her students have graduated to the professional ranks as well.

Dance fever

Choreographer enjoys the nuances of fancy footwork

By Alisha Lide
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Dance has always been part of Veronica Badgett's life.

Badgett, owner and operator of BB Dance Productions, started the studio 15 years ago, but her dance career was birthed before junior high school. From teaching at Matthews Community Center with 85 students and no air conditioning, Badgett now teaches at a spacious studio with over 300 students. BB Dance offers tap, jazz, ballet, tap, hip-hop, and gymnastics.

"Teaching has been a lifelong dream, not the dancing," she said. "My goal as a teacher is to help kids with self-esteem, be more rounded,

working as a team, respecting themselves, and others."

Badgett, a former choreographer with the former Charlotte Hornets' Honeybees, is a strict but successful instructor. Her students have danced across the country, including pro sports teams like the Hornets, Bobcats and Dallas Mavericks. They've also performed on the "Showtime at the Apollo" television show.

Badgett's evolving career has made her dancing destiny a success. She began her journey solo. "Approximately for the first four years I did everything on my own," she said. "I wore many hats: Choreography, costuming. It's been a great journey, it

has been rewarding. I've done it for so long, I am more business smart. My schedule has slowed down quite a bit. I have more help, and more staff."

After 15 years, Badgett's journey seems complete, but she still has a few long-term goals. "I want to go into my own building, and I would really like to build the Irene Bradley Scholarship Fund," which honors Badgett's deceased grandmother. "She raised me, she was just a great grandmother," Badgett said.

Another goal for Badgett is to expand the scholarship beyond one student as well as give scholarships throughout the community.

Growth slow for service economy

Study: Expansion recorded in May, but at lower rate than in April

By Peter Svensson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The service sector of the U.S. economy expanded in May, but at a slower pace than in April, a private survey of supply managers said on Monday.

The report offered a possible indication that fuel prices are starting to crimp growth in the service sector, which accounts for two-thirds of the U.S. economy. The survey by the Institute for Supply Management indicated concern about the prices of raw materials and fuels.

The ISM index of non-manufacturing activity was 60.1 in May, down from 63 in April. The latest reading matched analysts' expectations.

A reading of 50 and above points to growth, while a figure below 50 signals contraction.

Managers in diverse sectors like transportation, banking and retailing reported that energy costs were having an effect.

Increases in general business activity, new orders and backlogs slowed in May compared to April, while increases in prices paid, hiring and foreign trade accelerated.

Last week, the ISM reported that expansion of activity in the manufacturing sector also slowed. Its manufacturing index dipped to a reading of 54.4 in May from 57.3 in April.

Ed Yardeni, chief investment strategist at investment firm Oak Associates Ltd. in Akron, Ohio, called the service-sector number "solid."

"They can complain about their costs going up, but they've been pretty good about offsetting them with higher productivity and still maintaining high profits," Yardeni said. "So I'm not particularly concerned about that leading to higher inflation or lower profits."

The core annual rate of inflation at the consumer end is already above the 2 percent favored by the Federal Reserve, which points to further interest-rate increases.

However, a slowdown in economic growth could make the Fed's rate-setting committee conclude that further hikes in interest rates are unnecessary.

The next meeting of the Federal Reserve Open Markets Committee is June 28-29. Before that, the Labor Department reports on May consumer prices on June 14.

Allstate settles lawsuit over discrimination against blacks and Hispanics

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN ANTONIO — Allstate Corp. said Friday it has settled a class-action lawsuit over allegations it charged blacks and Hispanics higher rates for auto and homeowner insurance by basing prices on information from credit reports.

Customers who were overcharged will be able to seek payment. Allstate agreed to disclose and change some of

its pricing formulas and tell minority customers how to improve their credit ratings.

A spokesman for Allstate, the second-largest U.S. personal-lines insurer, said the company didn't discriminate based on race.

The company can't yet estimate the cost of the settlement, but it won't be significant, said spokesman Michael Trevino.

A federal district court

judge in San Antonio gave his preliminary approval to the deal on Friday.

The case was filed in 2001 on behalf of six customers who said their civil rights were violated because Allstate charged them higher premiums by using information from their credit reports.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs said there had never been a verdict or settlement that forced an insurer to change

the way it uses credit reports in setting policy prices.

"This is a very important settlement," said lead plaintiff attorney Christa Collins. "Credit information is used extensively throughout the entire insurance industry... We believe this change significantly benefits Allstate's minority customers."

Trevino, the spokesman for Northbrook, Ill.-based Allstate, said the company

settled the case to avoid the expense of continued litigation. He said the company didn't know whether the settlement would lead to lower rates for minority customers.

The settlement calls for Allstate to change its insurance-scoring algorithm and give customers a chance to have their policy priced using the new formula. The company will also offer a system for customers to appeal for rate

reductions if they experience extraordinary events that hurt their credit history.

Allstate will begin sending out notices of the settlement to customers next month, Trevino said.

The plaintiffs sought to represent all blacks and Hispanics nationwide who bought policies from Allstate-affiliated companies

