

# Party central? Derby might make you think so

During the final weekend of the Humana Festival in March, I had a plum seat among the theater professionals invited each year to evaluate the festival and the talent that goes into it. I found myself sitting between an enthusiastic arts patron from the West Coast and an old curmudgeon from the East Coast.

The East Coast man eventually asked me where I was from. "I'm from here," I said. "I'm sorry," he said.

And although I asked why he would say such a thing, I really didn't defend my city against his assertion that Louisville didn't have much more than the festival and a few venues within a short walking distance of Actors Theatre.

I could have told him that within a few months of moving here from a larger city, just about everyone who

makes such a move loves their new home, or so they tell me. I could have highlighted the variety of restaurants and the absence of traffic. I could have told him to just imagine what the city will be like with a new arena and a new mayor. And of course, I could have implored him to not judge the city until he's had a chance to return for the Derby.

The Kentucky Derby. Another festival in which a sea of out-of-town VIPs descend upon the city

for a few days to indulge in a continuous cycle of revelry constructed by the city's tourism and hospitality industries.

Now I sound like the East Coast curmudgeon.

My tone isn't meant to be sardonic; I actually find it somewhat amusing. The Derby isn't theater, but it is a production. An incredible amount of imagination, collaboration, scripting, costume design, set design, technical expertise and rehearsal must go into any affair that can convince national radio and television personalities that Louisville is a black party city.

Each time I hear that the Monday after the Derby, I laugh. The very idea of Louisville being a black party city was funny to me before the Grand Gala folded this year. It was funny before this very publication managed to find only one black person — in Lexington, not Louisville — among the 33 up-and-comers who make the Derby happen. It was even funny

before the restrictions on cruising along Broadway began.

It was and remains funny because while there is at least one event or party geared toward urban professionals almost every week throughout the year in Louisville, most events here are not. It would be illogical to expect anything different; the majority of a city's events shouldn't be geared toward a group that's not the majority of the local population. Yet, the dearth of new options for activities for urban professionals and the repetition of existing ones make the display around the Derby laughable.

I've come to realize that everyone in the city who wants to play a role in the Derby production plays it. Many of the same promoters who host parties throughout the year host them in a slightly larger venue, increase the cover charge tenfold and create a VIP section. They then watch the same people who attend throughout the year pay the increased cover charge to

attend a party they've been to many times.

For at least one weekend, the wishful thinking of the promoters and attendees is fulfilled, and their city is what they fantasize about for the rest of the year. Sometimes the chance that a celebrity may pass through the party is enough to convince Louisville's urban professionals that their home has transformed itself into Atlanta or Chicago for a weekend. The event planners and tourism bureau persuade the VIPs to return at the same time the following year, and sometimes before then, and the show goes on.

The Derby show isn't enough to convince me that my city is full of new and fun events that interest me, but at least it's good for a laugh. ♣

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