

## Cotton Room revelers savor a slice of Paris



By Cliff Bellamy

cbellamy@heraldsun.com; 419-6744

The billing for the grand opening of The Cotton Room at Golden Belt promised to be "spectacular" with "elephants," "courtesans," "illusionists," "masters of dance" and more.

Party-goers were urged to wear festive attire, but at 6 p.m., when the party began, the most festive and exotic scene was provided by Patika Starr and Christine Geiger, who go by the stage name of The Ember Ellas, a Greensboro-based entertainment duo. Dressed in black, silver and red, and carrying umbrellas, they balanced on stilts just outside Golden Belt and greeted people arriving at the soiree.

Later, they did a dance inside to lighted hula hoops, and were scheduled to do a fire dance later in the evening -- outside -- as people left the party. (A reporter did not see any elephants on site.)

The Ember Ellas were the most festive happening until visitors went to level 3 of Building 2 of Golden Belt, where two women in costume were in swings suspended from an exposed wooden beam.

The Cotton Room, a renovated events space that can be used for parties and other functions, opened Thursday to a party set to evoke the Moulin Rouge era in Paris. This Moulin Rouge party was part French with many touches of Durham. While there were no Edith Piaf songs, Kate Ferrer sang an aria from the opera "Carmen," and the Groove Towne Band played plenty of funk tunes -- "Pick Up the Pieces," and, of course "Celebrate."

The Cotton Room is the latest venture of Michelle and Dodd Aldred, who founded Raleigh-based Triangle Catering in 1991. The Cotton Room has a full kitchen on the first floor of the building, and a smaller kitchen on the third floor. The renovation included new floors and a new heating and cooling system. The Aldreds kept the former manufacturing facility's historic features intact -- the old beams and columns, and the pulley system.

"I wanted to have a grand party for all my clients and present what we can do with the space," Michelle Aldred said, "so we decided to do a little Moulin Rouge theme to get people excited."

Judging from the celebrants, it seems to have worked. "I think it's awesome," said Erin McLean. "Durham needed a space like this. It's kind of a blank canvas for people to do what they want," she said.

"I think it's absolutely wonderful," said Michael Pullum. "It's class A. You couldn't ask for more."

"This is something I really think they're going to get a lot of benefit from," said Bill Aldred, father of Dodd Aldred, "and I think it's going to be a benefit to the community."

Some technicians who helped create the Paris cabaret effect were on hand to see their work in action. UNC Chapel Hill theater students Katy Werlin, Amanda Cain and Brittany Johnson did the make-up for the servers and everyone who was in costume.

Their teacher, Randy Handley, who teaches stage make-up in UNC's Drama Department, said the party provided a good real-world situation, one in which the students had to work with different materials, face shapes and skin tones. "They learn, taking my design and applying it to a variety of faces," Handley said.

Josh Andrews, a lighting designer, provided the ambience. To create the mood, he used "a lot of red, a lot of hot pinks and purples." Later in the night, he planned to add more blue tones.

In its manufacturing days, Golden belt made cotton bags for tobacco, and later paper packaging for cigarette containers and cardboard for cartons. It has been renovated as a space for offices, lofts, artist studios and other uses.

In July, the American Dance Festival took advantage of the openness of the Cotton Room space. Students at the festival performed a site-specific work in the space, titled "Golden Belt," that also evoked Golden Belt's history.

The new events facility is expected to increase weekend activity at Golden Belt. Other downtown boosters have said it might help Durham attract more of the destination wedding business.