



Mementos from early days of Free Southern Theatre are placed in a symbolic empty coffin, foreground during a traditional jazz funeral for the near-legendary company.

Lloyd Dennis

FREE AT LAST

An emotional farewell is staged for activist Free Southern Theatre.

By Jim O'Quinn

It's a fine morning for a funeral. The low-lying Louisiana sun slants across Rampart Street and into New Orleans' Louis Armstrong Park, turning its meandering, man-made lagoons a violent green and buttering the shoulders of a crowd of a hundred or so milling there. The crowd, about half black, half white, has come to put Free Southern Theatre to rest.

They're not exactly mourners, though, for this funeral has been announced as a "valediction without mourning." There's as much celebration as sorrow in the sun-drenched air as old friends greet one another, a clown troupe from Atlanta lazily juggles tenpins in the shade of the drooping willows, high school youngsters in T-shirts warm up their horns in preparation for the traditional "second line" jazz funeral. The service will be a belated one, for Free Southern Theatre met its official demise more than five years ago, in 1980.

It was born some 17 years earlier, in 1963, out of the urgent turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. FST's self-styled mission was "to bring the theatre to those who have no theatre," namely the rural black communities of the Deep South. The company's founders—Southern-born activist John O'Neal, fledgling actor and director Gilbert Moses, a young painter from New York named Doris Derby—fashioned FST as a cultural and political tool in the then-fermenting process of social change; their vision was one of artists and audiences in mutual struggle against racism.

For a decade, supported by major foundations and government grants, FST pursued that vision, touring its integrated, politically charged performances to rural areas of Louisiana and Mississippi while also maintaining a home base in New Orleans. But by the mid-'70s, with the big battles over integration and voting rights won and its funding drying up, FST lost its sense of direction. Many of its actors and directors had left to pursue careers in New York and Los Angeles, and productions became increasingly sporadic. In 1980, dogged by persistent poverty and undercut by the changing political climate, the theatre's leaders called it quits.

"Ever since then I've wanted to call

together all the graduates and friends of FST to rejoice in the theatre's existence, to put it to rest, and to applaud its offspring," says John O'Neal, the director most intimately connected to FST throughout its history. From the early tours of *In White America*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Purlie Victorious* in 1964-65 through the lean years of the '70s, it was O'Neal who gave clearest voice to the theatre's ever-developing ideas, who mediated and survived its sometimes bitter internal conflicts, who shored up the company's faltering management and engineered repeated fundraising efforts to keep it alive. Finally, when group productions were no longer feasible, O'Neal developed a solo work, the first of his *Junebug Jabo Jones* monologues, and toured it as the final FST production.

The goodbye he planned for the theatre has included not only this celebratory funeral but a performance festival at New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center (featuring such FST "offspring" as Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Ky., A Traveling Jewish Theatre of San Francisco and Atlanta's Jomandi Productions) and a three-day conference at Loyola University on "The Role of Art in the Process of Social Change." The conference, designed to help create a documented history of FST "so others

can learn from looking at our experiences," was less successful as a study of the connections between political action and art than it was in generating profound echoes of the intensity and heartfelt commitment of the Movement years.

Those echoes continue in Armstrong Park as one of the bands strikes up a brass-heavy version of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and the funeral marshal, decked out in red satin sash and sequined white umbrella, begins the slow, bowing prance of the jazz funeral procession. The crowd gathers around an empty, rust-colored coffin, singing, swaying rhythmically. When the song is over, O'Neal comes forward to speak about the necessity for "inventing and reinventing our rituals, as a way to capture the values of the past." Sounding a note heard often at the conference, he observes, "Our failures are more important than what we succeeded at. The greatest value in what Free Southern Theatre did was in making the right mistakes." Voice breaking, he pays brief tribute to several FST veterans who have died, including Andrew Young, Sr. and actress Diana Sands.

"We've got a box here—there's nothing in it but what we put in it," he goes on, and people come forward to place mementos in the coffin: aging photos, dollar bills, a kazoo, a tiny brass elephant, dog-eared posters advertising long-ago FST performances, a South African passbook. The band launches into a clamorous chorus of "Ain't Gonna Study War No More," and the joyous music vibrates in the morning air. When pallbearers shoulder their easy load and the crowd trails after the funeral marshal in a wending procession between the green lagoons, the song they sing is "We Shall Overcome."

That venerable anthem, so frequently heard in recent nationwide observances of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, had already been sung at the closing session of the Loyola conference, where comparisons were inevitably evoked between the idealism and sense of possibility alive in the '60s and the bleaker outlook for arts and activism of our present generation. There was talk from artists inspired by FST's agenda of "rebirth" and "transformation," of progressive work going on in artforms other than theatre; but few took issue with Ruby Lerner, executive director of the

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Atlanta-based arts coalition Alternate ROOTS, when she warned in one session that economically and politically repressive forces are on the increase and "even tougher times are coming."

Another perspective on these changes came from John Dillon, artistic director of Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, who pointed out, "While FST was struggling along in its early years, something else was going on—the growth of the resident theatre movement. An important question to ask ourselves is, in what ways today can institutional theatres support social process, be activists? Just because an institution has a multi-million dollar budget and operates out of a big marble building doesn't mean it can't operate with a social conscience."

The difficulties of doing so in FST's case were evident, however, in the

accounts by its alumni of ideological, artistic and economic struggles. Measured against its primary objective—the development of theatre among rural blacks in the South—FST was indeed a failure. The theatre's performances, often to audiences brought together by SNCC or other activist groups and united by the fervor of black resistance, came and went without leaving a visible mark. Nor was FST able to build a permanent audience in New Orleans, a notoriously tough theatre town where a heavily subsidized professional repertory company briefly thrived in the late '60s and early '70s. Today (aside from the Saenger, a renovated roccoco movie palace which serves as a tryout house for such Broadway properties as the upcoming *Legends*, with Mary Martin and Carol Channing) the only theatre of interest in New Orleans is sponsored by the Contemporary Arts Center, a warehouse arts complex that has in the years since it began in 1976 re-energized the city's visual arts and music scene. In addition to hosting such events as the FST performance festival, the CAC now mounts a season of theatre and is home base for the black acting troupe Dashiki.

If FST failed to send roots deep into New Orleans' marshy delta soil (even as it spun off successful careers like that of director Gilbert Moses and television actress Denise Nicholas, and inspired a new generation of activist artists), it has been indelibly absorbed into the city's racial myth: It was the South's first integrated theatre, bringing together idealistic young blacks and whites, urban and rural dwellers, performing artists and ghetto survivors.

Now, as the funeral throng follows a dancing white umbrella out the lakeside gate of Armstrong Park and into St. Claude Street, "We Shall Overcome" gives way to the thumping rhythms of "Li'l Liza Jane" and "Good Golly Miss Molly." The procession, all pretense of mourning abandoned to the rhythms and release of the music, wends through the still-ungentrified Treme neighborhood. Women on the sun-bleached, shuttered stoops smile and wave, and men peer out of barber shops, unsurprised by yet another parade. Children from the yards and sidewalks join the train. There'll be no more Free Southern Theatre when this march is over, no epitaph more solid than this dance.



FST co-founder John O'Neal falls into step with the funeral marshal as the procession wends through New Orleans' Treme neighborhood.

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