FREE AT LAST
An emotional farewell is staged for activist Free Southern Theatre.

By Jim O'Quinn

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 Jabbo 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...
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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 rococo 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.