

View From The Free Southern Theater

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I am not prepared to discuss theater (ours or any other) in the vernacular of conventional white theater--professional, community or otherwise. The most I can offer *LIBERATOR* readers is a discussion of our work in terms of where we are and where we want to go. That in itself presents a few problems because our direction is relatively new in terms of theater as far as the Black community is concerned (new for us). It becomes involved quite deeply with considerations that are more political than artistic but then, I for one, find it difficult to draw any swift clean line between art and politics.

The Free Southern Theater has recently gone through a series of cultural and, if I may put it so, political changes. We have, in the past, been an "integrated, professional touring theater in the Deep South based in New Orleans." Our plays have been *In White America*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Purlie Victorious*, *The Rifles of Senora Carrar* (Brecht), and two improvisational shows based on incidents and people of Jonesboro and Bogaloussa Louisiana.

The improvisational shows were by far the most exciting things we've done--both theatrically and politically. That told us something: plays written by persons outside of the Black ex-

perience--whether the authors be Black or white--don't have the same meaning for us or the audience. The audience response to the improvisational shows (which used our actors and many people from the communities) was so overwhelming that the inherent relevance and pure communal experience were obvious. That doesn't mean we won't do written plays but it does mean that the plays we do will be plays written within the confines of the Black experience--here and in Africa.

Our desire to make our theater and actors available to Black playwrights is strong. I find that Black people have been writing plays for a long time and far too few have been produced. Also, I find that Black people have been interested in the art of acting since the days of slavery; and you and I both know how many Black actors are on the stage in any one season. That means to me that we need Black theaters in the Black communities. It means we had better stop waiting for the man to integrate his theaters before our talent dries inside of us like dust in the Southern sun.

The Free Southern Theater's changes are primarily efforts to root ourselves in the Black community in New Orleans, to present the idea to

the Black community that this theater is theirs, and that we've got to make it together or not at all.

We are presently running acting workshops with a view to presenting an evening of improvisational things or a play. A stagecraft workshop is about to start under the direction of our Technical Director. As a separate entity, but in close association with the theater, we are setting up an Afro-American African Information Center. This project will be a center not of reading and studying primarily, but of discussion. The first time I walked into the Schomburg Collection in Harlem, I knew we had to have some kind of public information center down here, with art objects done by Black people, photographs, films, slides, books, magazines, etc. We had to have a place where our people could talk with each other, about our history and future, about our present situation. We don't want to have a library like the Schomburg--quiet, firm, full of books that most of us don't read. We do want to have visual things and some books. We want Black people from Africa and the U.S., from New Orleans or Brazil to come to our Center for a week or so to help disseminate the truth about our people.

What we are doing is not easy. Black people in the area--young and old--have shown enthusiasm about the theater. Our rehearsals are open and always there, are the spectators. The youngsters have shown such interest and talent that we're working on a show using all "little" people.

The theater needs new ideas and young blood. I don't mean necessarily new ideas that are "avant-garde," I don't mean playing in-

intellectual games. The needs of the Black community are many and the theater has got to involve itself with them. It has got to address itself to the drama that already exists in any Black community, to the violence, the frustration. It cannot be a pacifier for those feelings, but it must clarify them. The theater must somehow deal with questions like: "Why is there only one road into and out of the Desire Project in New Orleans?" "Why aren't the streets paved in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans?" "Why does the white man own that store on the corner and not one of us -- we shop there every day?" "Why am I always giving my money to the white man as soon as I get it?" "Why is my head conked and why does my wife have to have her head fried every week or so?" "Why do they show those damn horror movies for our kids to see every week?" And a host of other questions which must be posed, answered and acted upon.

To get back to where we are right now: we are working on an evening of Black poetry, Afro-American and African, strong poetry that says something about being Black in this country. We are rehearsing an original play called Roots written by Gilbert Moses, one of the founders of the theater. Finally, we are looking for a third play to fill out our touring season. We now plan to spend about half our time in New Orleans working with one specific community, and half on the road playing in various Southern Black communities.

Somewhere I hear echoes of nationalism, I hear rumblings of racial unity for the purpose of achieving ends which have not been achieved through any method in the history of our struggle in this country. To that, let me only add that theater can play a very vital and effective role in uniting the Black community. The theater can be a tool, a weapon of whatever its audience and artists want it to be. It can serve educational purposes in teaching Afro-American and African history, it can point out and clarify the contradictions in the Black community, it can help us re-find our racial dignity and our dignity as men and women. It can point to the enemy in all his forms -- his masks, his words, his direction, his location.

The Free Southern Theater finally is going in the direction of the colonized Black people of a Southern ghetto with the hope of acting as a catalyst rather than sedative to action in that community.

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