

FREE SOUTHERN THEATER

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We are three young people working in the Southern movement in Mississippi. Two of us are field secretaries for S.N.C.C., and one of us is on the staff of the Mississippi Free Press. Our involvement and experiences here lead us to the conclusion that there is a need for a Free Southern Theater.

We propose to establish a legitimate theater in the deep South with its base in Jackson, Mississippi.

Our fundamental objective is to stimulate creative and reflective thought among Negroes in Mississippi and other Southern states by the establishment of a legitimate theater, thereby providing the opportunity for involvement in the theater and the associated art forms.

We specifically hope to accomplish the following:

1. To acquaint Southern peoples with a breadth of experience with the theater and related art forms.
2. To liberate and explore the creative talent and potential that is here, as well as to promote the production of art.
3. To emphasize the universality of the problems of the Negro people.
4. To develop an appreciation of the theater and related art forms--an understanding of the technical problems as well as ideas and concepts.
5. To bring in artists from outside the state as well as to provide the opportunity for local people with creative ability to have experience with the theater.
6. To strengthen communication between Southern Negroes.
7. To assert that self knowledge and creativity are the foundations of human dignity.

The above listed objectives are set in accordance with the following observations:

Mississippi--The Caste System in a Cultural Desert

1. The development of patterns of reflective and creative thought have been restricted.

a.) Education: The segregated Mississippi Public School system restricts the learning process rather than nourishes it. School textbooks are controlled, discussion of controversial topics are forbidden, teachers have no choice in school programming and are under constant supervision and pressure. It is apparent that competent teachers and honest education will not be the concern of a school system fundamentally built to keep Negroes out of white schools.

Since the majority of the school teachers are products of the same system, the students' legacy is inadequate training and an unclear understanding of the world in which they live.

b.) Mass Media: The newspapers in Mississippi are not a source of information concerning the activities of the community or of the state. The distortions of these newspapers are twofold: 1) What is not printed--any valid information about Mississippi's economics and politics; 2) What is printed--highly distorted and biased articles supporting the Mississippi "way of life." The two Negro weeklies--excluding the Mississippi Free Press--financed, and in one case controlled, by the same association which owns the white newspapers, fail to convey true information to the Negro community and are virtually useless and retrogressive in purpose.

i. Television: Controlled and almost never admits controversial topics.

ii. Radio: Jackson, Mississippi has one Negro radio station which is dedicated to rock-and-roll.

Conclusion: The civil rights movement has greatly affected the vacuum in which the Mississippi Negro lives. Yet, it is still probable that the Negro is the last to be informed of a situation which directly concerns him. He has been unable to develop naturally because he has found himself in

a society which excludes him from its public consciousness which is, by necessity, his own public consciousness.

c.) The Negro Community and its Cultural Resources.

Although Jackson is the largest urban area in Mississippi with a population of approximately 200,000, its 75,000 Negroes are without cultural resources other than one recreation center controlled by the State, one movie theater, two inadequate Y's each with 1,000 members, quite a few juke joints, and about 175 churches. The municipal auditorium is closed to Negroes.

In general, the cultural institutions in Jackson are engaged in a tense struggle for which there exists no immediate solution. Working within a controlled situation, they attempt solutions to problems within the Negro community, but are unable to affect the external cause of the problems--deprivation caused by the oppressive caste system.

Conclusion: Mississippi's closed system effectively refuses the Negro knowledge of himself, and has stunted the mental growth of the majority of Mississippi Negroes.

2. There exists a wealth of talent that has been denied the opportunity of development and expression.
3. It is necessary that an education program coincide with and augment the program of the freedom movement.
4. There will be opposition from the present power structure to the theater program.

A FREE SOUTHERN THEATER

While it is true that the theater which we propose would by no means be a solution to the tremendous problems faced by the people who suffer the oppressive system in the South, we feel that the theater will add a valuable and necessary dimension to the current civil rights movement through its unique value as a means of education.

THE PLAN

We hope to establish the foundation of a permanent, non-profit community theater in Jackson, Mississippi. The official opening of the theater--entailing theatrical facilities and a dramatic program--

is planned for mid-June of 1964, immediately after the close of the Spring college semester.

In the beginning, we feel it necessary to develop our own drama group composed of students, and anyone outside of Mississippi, professional and amateur actors, desiring to participate in the program. This would limit the community at large to the role of spectator during the initial months. We hope, however, that the success of our program will enable expansion of the original program to include all levels of community participation not only in the dramatic art but also in the art forms associated with drama--music, dance, and painting.

Our program of plays should include all those dealing with real human problems. It is apparent that since we--the initiators of the program--are involved in the civil rights movement, our choices shall be oriented to plays dealing with the Negro in problematical situations. The choice of plays will then honestly embrace drama from Aeschylus to Albee, but our emphasis will be on the published and unpublished works of Negro playwrights which treat the anxieties and which express the problems of our age.

THE STARTING POINT

Starting with a small group of students from Tougaloo College and other interested individuals, a kind of dramatic workshop is being formed in Jackson, Mississippi, under the direction of the three persons submitting the theater proposal.

The purpose of this group is to familiarize themselves with the art of theater by actual participation in the different phases of play production: from acting to stage scenery. We hope to gain some experience in drama technique through experimentation with different dramatic forms--one act plays, pantomime, and improvisations.

In order to develop a dramatic style which can best bring out the unique experiences of the Southern Negro, and so that a versatile group able to serve the repertory nature of the proposed theater can be developed, improvisational experimentation is the emphasis of the group's activity.

Already participants in this group have been involved in a production of Purlie Victorious, recently presented at Tougaloo College, and will be involved in another Tougaloo production in the Spring. It is hoped that by the beginning of next June, this group will be prepared to present Purlie Victorious and other plays in different communities throughout Mississippi.

By June, we hope to begin the theater. This will require competent theater facilities, and adequate funds to sustain the complete operation of the theater for at least the entire summer. After the summer, that is, during the school year, the theater program will combine presentations in Jackson with trips to Southern rural communities.

MEANS OF STARTING

All our efforts until the beginning of June, will be directed toward the acquisition of physical facilities, and the organization of the group.

During this time, different means will be used to raise money for the theater, and to initiate a general cultural program in Jackson, Mississippi. We feel we can combine these two goals by sponsoring a series of benefit concerts and workshops using local and outside performers.

The charge for these concerts will be minimal, depending upon the amount of money raised initially through donations, and the amount needed to publicize the concerts.

THE REALIZATION

The administrative needs of the official theater will be:

A producer: Hopefully, the theater and its program will be sustained by a national board of sponsors, patrons, and donations. Since our admission policy will be a combination of minimal admission charges and a large distribution of free tickets, the usual source of subsistence and profit for a legitimate theater--the admission fee--is expected to play a small part in the income needed to operate the theater.

a director; a choreographer; a musical director; an administrative secretary; an electrician; a set designer; a costume mistress; a public relations director; and money: 1) operation of theater facility; 2) acquisition of necessary materials, and properties; 3) publicity; 4) transportation for theater of repertory nature; 5) subsistence wages for staff.

Although the above listed positions are defined, everyone will be expected to take part in all phases of the theater program which ranges from the highly specialized technical functions to the distribution of free tickets in rural communities.