



Free Southern Theater



Matt Hemm/Alto Stock

“Through theater, we think to open a new area of protest ... one that permits the growth of and self-knowledge of a Negro audience, one that supplements the present struggle for freedom.

“... we feel that the theater will add a necessary dimension to the current Civil Rights Movement through its unique value as a means of education.”

from A General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater.

The Free Southern Theater was founded in 1963 by Gilbert Moses, John O’Neal, and Doris Derby at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi

In the summer of 1964, the FST presented Martin Duberman’s *In White America* to audiences in 16 Mississippi communities where there were COFO projects. The tour was so successful, the FST returned in the fall with *Purlie Victorious* and *Waiting for Godot*.

“COFO project volunteers worked with us to secure places for the performances, homes to house our company members in each town, and helped with publicity,” recalls O’Neal. “The Free Southern Theater

became the focus of a community event involving everyone and open to everyone.”

In Indianola, Mississippi, some 200 people arrived while the company was still setting up a playing area on a field next to the Freedom School which had recently been condemned by city officials after a fire had “mysteriously” broken out in the building. The FST company enlisted children among the 200 onlookers to help set up the staging area.

It was raining when the theater company arrived in Mound Bayou and the dirt roads had been churned into mud moats. Yet the people came to the performance, driving for miles in their trucks.

The mission of the Free Southern Theater continues today through Junebug Productions, whose artistic director is John O’Neal.

ABOVE: the cast of the Free Southern Theater gets ready for a performance at the dedication of a community center in Mileston, Mississippi, Summer, 1964.