

Anthology Vol. 2: Chapter 5 Summary

“DO YOU SMELL SOMETHING STINKY?”: Notes from Conversations about Making Art while Working for Peace in Racist, Imperial America in the 21st Century,

By John O’Neal, Cynthia Cohen, Polly Walker, Roberto Varea, and Lesley Yalen

In this chapter, theatre artist and civil rights leader John O’Neal discusses the role that performance played in the mid-twentieth century U.S. civil rights movement and the role it is playing today in the struggle against racism and other forms of injustice in the American South.

O’Neal was one of the founders of the Free Southern Theater (FST), which added “a cultural and educational dimension to the Southern freedom movement” of the 1960s and ‘70s. For seventeen years, FST toured and gave theatre workshops in communities across the rural and urban South.

When FST closed its doors in 1980, O’Neal founded Junebug Productions, a professional theatre organization based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Junebug produces high quality performances that “inspire and support people who work for justice in the African American community and in the world-at-large.”

The conversations at the heart of this chapter give O’Neal the chance to convey his ideas through stories. Storytelling, he posits, is a kind of performance uniquely suited to building a just peace. “Arguments tend to evoke counter-arguments,” O’Neal says. “Stories tend to evoke empathetic responses and more stories.”

Free Southern Theater

The Free Southern Theater emerged in 1963 when the momentum of the U.S. civil rights movement was strong and there were signs of progress toward equal rights for African Americans.

FST was committed to “the growth and self-knowledge of a new Southern audience of Negroes and whites” and to supporting “the efforts to end the practice of racism in the southern United States and the world.” Grounded in a philosophy of populism, participatory democracy, and community outreach, FST gave free community workshops and performances aimed not only at educating audiences, but also learning from and building relationships with them.

Junebug Productions

For nearly thirty years, Junebug Productions has been creating professional theatre addressing themes of relevance to African Americans and to other oppressed peoples.

The organization's work has included *The Junebug Cycle: Sayings From the Life and Writings of Junebug Jabbo Jones*—four plays compiled from African American folk stories, songs, and culture. Junebug, the main character of these plays, moves through the history of African Americans as a keen observer, truth-teller, and “keeper of dreams.”

In recent years, with the realization that Junebug Productions was having less of an impact than FST—despite the fact that it was producing “better” theatre—Junebug has started to do more community programming. One tool they have developed for working with communities is the “story circle,” a process of bringing people together to share personal stories in a structured, accepting environment. The story circle is “one of the best tactics I’ve seen for justice- and peace-building, and for problem solving...,” says O’Neal. “People learn the technique of working through a democratic group process, where the object isn’t to win, but to share.”

Junebug teaches this process, which fosters deep listening and understanding, to artists, activists, and educators, who use it to strengthen their communities, to address conflicts, and to deepen their work. O’Neal describes the potential of story circles this way:

If you get people thinking and talking about real stories, suspending argument for a time, and building relationships through sharing narratives, from there I believe you can expand the process to the exploration of real issues and alternatives. Having laid a basis of mutual respect and listening, people can then approach points of contention and issues of injustice productively and with fresh perspectives.

O’Neal includes in the chapter a detailed description of the story circle process, so that others can use it in their own communities.

Building Justice, Building Peace

The struggle for peace is intimately connected to and dependent upon the struggle for justice. For oppressed people, an absence of military engagement alone is not peace; there can be no peace until there is equality and opportunity. Theatre’s importance as a peacebuilding tool comes from its ability to be transformative, O’Neal says, and from its ability to challenge injustices and destructive norms. For John O’Neal, the only theatre that is relevant today is that which is part of the process of redressing injustice and improving the quality of people’s lives—in other words, part of the struggle for peace.

O’Neal feels that this kind of transformative theatre emerges not from the success of an individual artist, but from the success of the relationship *between* the artist and the community. That is to say, he feels that the emphasis on the impressive individual in art is misplaced, as no individual can put an end to racism, injustice, and violence. “I don’t think this glorifying of the individual serves contemporary circumstances very well,” he says, “and it certainly doesn’t serve oppressed people.”

The chapter discusses the origins of racism in America and its continuing presence as a primary source of oppression, seen in recent situations such as the response to Hurricane

Katrina and the events surrounding the “Jena 6” in Louisiana. The author emphasizes the difficulties of addressing racism even among close friends and like-minded colleagues, arguing that fully addressing the legacy of slavery in the United States remains a priority for black and white theatre artists and peacebuilders alike. “Our challenge as citizens who are also artists,” says O’Neal, “is to mobilize ourselves to join the struggle for justice, from which will follow a legitimate but still impermanent peace.”