



John O'Neal
Teller of stories from rural Dixie

Divergent cultures at the Bride

APPALACHIAN, from 1-C but now we are *peoples*, and it's important that we not throw off all that rich cultural identity and lose the individual cultural expression that, it seems to me, is so much the soul of the country."

Roadside Theater is part of Appalshop, an arts organization that grew out of the Appalachian Workshops set up in the late 1960s as part of the Lyndon Johnson administration's War on Poverty. The workshop started out with young Kentuckians filming the area's residents and activities, and it is still best-known for the visual record it produces of the people of the Appalachian region. Appalshop also started a recording studio and radio station in Whitesburg (population 1,500) and launched the theater in 1974.

The theater, Cocke said, has a repertory of six original plays and a company of 12 actors, most of whom have been performing together for 10 or more years. Although it maintains a theater in Whitesburg, the company gives most of its performances on tours across the country.

O'Neal got into theater through the civil-rights movement. He was a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the early 1960s and helped found the Free Southern Theater, which was dedicated to SNCC's goal of educating, inspiring and organizing poor Southern blacks.

'Junebug says ...'

SNCC workers, O'Neal said, were given to prefacing comments with the remark "Junebug says ..." a reference to the derogatory nickname (Junebug Jabbo) given to a professor at Howard University, which some SNCC organizers had attended. Over time, the collection of Junebug aphorisms grew — *Jones* was added for rhythm and alliteration — and became emblematic of the wisdom of the people.

When the Free Southern Theater folded in 1980, O'Neal struck out on his own and created a one-person show of traditional and new stories about blacks and the South that he called *Don't Start Me to Talkin' or I'll Tell You Everything I Know: Sayings From the Life and Writings of Junebug Jabbo Jones*. He has performed that show and two Junebug sequels across the country, including Philadelphia.

Although it has taken a decade for Roadside Theater and O'Neal to collaborate on a theater piece, they have been working together at such events as the Urban Theater Festival for some time. In fact, it was a conversation between O'Neal and Cocke in 1982 that launched the American Festival Project, which is supervised by Appalshop and organizes such events as the Urban Theater Festival in communities across the country.

They met at a theater retreat and, said Cocke, "the subject came up about Ku Klux Klan activity in the South. We were worrying about what that meant for John's audience and ours and what little thing we could do about it."

Visiting each other

"We got the idea of visiting each others' home communities and performing for the people there. We would try to uncover more about what we had in common as working folk, rather than what divided us."

The local Urban Cultural Festival has brought El Teatro de la Esperanza to Taller Puertorriqueno; Liz Lerman/Dance Exchange to the Meredith School in South Philadelphia to develop a dance with children and older adults, and the Urban Bushwomen to work with the Jaasu Ballet in North Philadelphia. The festival has sent personnel from Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions to Frankford.

The festival's work at Frankford-Style, 4620 Griscom St., echoes the purposes of *Junebug Jack*. Frankford is one of the city's oldest racially mixed neighborhoods, and area residents, both black and white, will present stories of what goes on in the community, Cocke said.

"We want to show how people can be brought together, that by hearing each other's stories, they can see what they have in common," Cocke said.

If you go

Junebug Jack, presented by Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions, is at 8 p.m. tonight and tomorrow at the Painted Bride Art Center, 230 Vine St. Tickets are \$12. Phone: 925-9914.