

John O'Neal, 78, Champion of Theater in the Deep South, Dies



Gilbert Moses, left, and John O'Neal, two of the three founders of the Free Southern Theater, in 1965. Their troupe brought theater to black audiences in the South during the civil rights era. *Credit Associated Press*

By Neil Genzlinger

John O'Neal, who co-founded a groundbreaking troupe that brought theater to black audiences in the South during the civil rights era, and who encouraged people to tell

their own stories as well as listen to his, died on Feb. 14 at his home in New Orleans. He was 78.

His daughter, Wendi Moore-O'Neal, said the cause was vascular disease.

Mr. O'Neal was still in his early 20s in 1963 when he, [Doris Derby](#) and [Gilbert Moses](#) founded the [Free Southern Theater](#), which presented free productions throughout the South. The troupe often performed in small towns to largely black audiences with little access to the theater.

Some of its productions emphasized black themes and characters; in one of the troupe's first shows, Ossie Davis's "Purlie Victorious," about a black preacher, Mr. O'Neal played the title character. But the company also performed works like "Waiting for Godot."

The idea, Mr. O'Neal explained in a 1964 interview with The New York Times, wasn't merely to expose black audiences to theater; it was also to get them thinking about their own stories.

"We want to strengthen communication among Southern blacks and to assert that self-knowledge and creativity are the foundations of human dignity," he said. "In the South it has been very hard for a Negro to look at and see anything but a distorted view of himself."

To that end he encouraged audience discussion after the shows, a practice he refined over the years.

"He noticed when they would do the talkbacks that people would just kind of argue for their position," his daughter said. "That meant that the people who talked the loudest and the longest would dominate the discussion. So he started timing people so that the time could be shared equally. And he started noticing that if people shared stories instead of making their argument, you wouldn't get stuck in the conflict; you could actually hear the connections."

These story circles, as he called them, became a trademark technique of his, both during the life of the Free Southern Theater, which disbanded in 1980, and with Junebug Productions, the successor arts organization he founded.

"Him doing theater and taking the makeup off and going out the back door was not his style," Carol Bebel, executive director of the [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) in New Orleans, who knew and worked with Mr. O'Neal for years, said in a telephone interview. "He really saw the audience as being the other part of the theatrical performance. It was: 'We brought something for you. Do you have something to give to us?'"



Mr. O'Neal, left, and Mr. Moses performing Martin Duberman's play "In White America" in 1964. The Free Southern Theater often performed in small towns to largely black audiences. *Credit University of Southern Mississippi*