

MICHELLE R. MOORE

John O'Neal spins tales in *Jabbo Jones*, one of more than 40 performances staged at the Alternate ROOTS festival in Atlanta. Below, Jake Dengel and T.R. Knight as Scrooge and Tiny Tim in *The Guthrie Theater's* perennial *A Christmas Carol*.

## Southern Exposure

### Alternative theatres rally at Atlanta festival

by JIM O'QUINN

**R**UBY LERNER, the outspoken, high-energy executive director of Alternate ROOTS, will tell you that "regional theatre" is a misnomer; that theatre management and marketing techniques are too often rigid and obsolete; that performers and critics ought to sit around together and talk over the reviews. And she'll give you straight-from-the-shoulder reasons for all these opinions.

That made for some lively conversation Oct. 3-10 in Atlanta, where 30-odd theatre

groups and individual artists joined Lerner, under the auspices of ROOTS (Regional Organization of Theatres-South), for a third biennial performance festival.

"It's distressing to see the so-called 'regional theatres' that aren't the least bit regional—throughout the country, they have virtually interchangeable seasons," Lerner contends. She sees her work as head of the Atlanta-based small theatre network as providing an antidote to the "pre-packaged theatre" that can result from institutional and economic pressures, as well as building a framework for the preservation, through performance, of southern U.S. history and culture.

The Atlanta festival was something of a test of Lerner's vision. Theatrically, the

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## Trouble in Paradise?

### German theatre faces new economic uncertainty

by ROGER DOWNEY

**T**O AMERICAN theatre artists and managers, never able to forget for long the question of sheer economic survival, West Germany has always seemed a little bit like paradise. In a country smaller than the state of Oregon there are 85 theatres financially supported in large measure by municipal, state and federal revenues: theatres with up to 200 on staff, employing actors on contracts running up to three years in length; with civil-service benefits

and job security for technicians; with director and designer fees high enough that a first-class guest artist can live for a year on the fee from just one of the dozen or more productions in a single theatre's repertory season.

What's more, for more than 30 years after the end of World War II, the level of government support grew almost continuously. In 1966 the average West German theatre received over 70 percent of its income from direct municipal or state subsidy. In 1978 the figure was near 84 percent. But with the Arab oil boycott of

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## Holiday without Scrooge

by JAMES LEVERETT

**I**N LAST December's *TheatreCommunications* I noted portentously: "There are 24 productions of *A Christmas Carol* being presented at TCG theatres this month. . . ." The ellipsis was meant to indicate what? Amazement? Deja vu? Probably a bit of both. Whatever the intent, and in the interest of tradition, let me inform you that there are 17 productions of *A Christmas Carol* being presented at TCG theatres this month. . . .

Why the statistical drop? Who knows. The number of TCG theatres is the same,

if not a bit larger. The reason is certainly not that Dickens' story has lost its attraction for the heart or for the box office. It is as much a part of the Christmas story as the star or the Wise Men. Its force is that of a myth, a universal story in which every one participates no matter how often it is told or how well. Only great fiction can be so true.

But it is always interesting to see what theatres do instead of *A Christmas Carol* to celebrate the holiday season. The Folger Theatre Group is turning to a particularly rich source—the great treasure of medieval drama and music both sacred and secular.

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BOYD HAGEN

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week was a mixed bag, but ROOTS' value as a showcase and rallying point was vividly clear onstage and off.

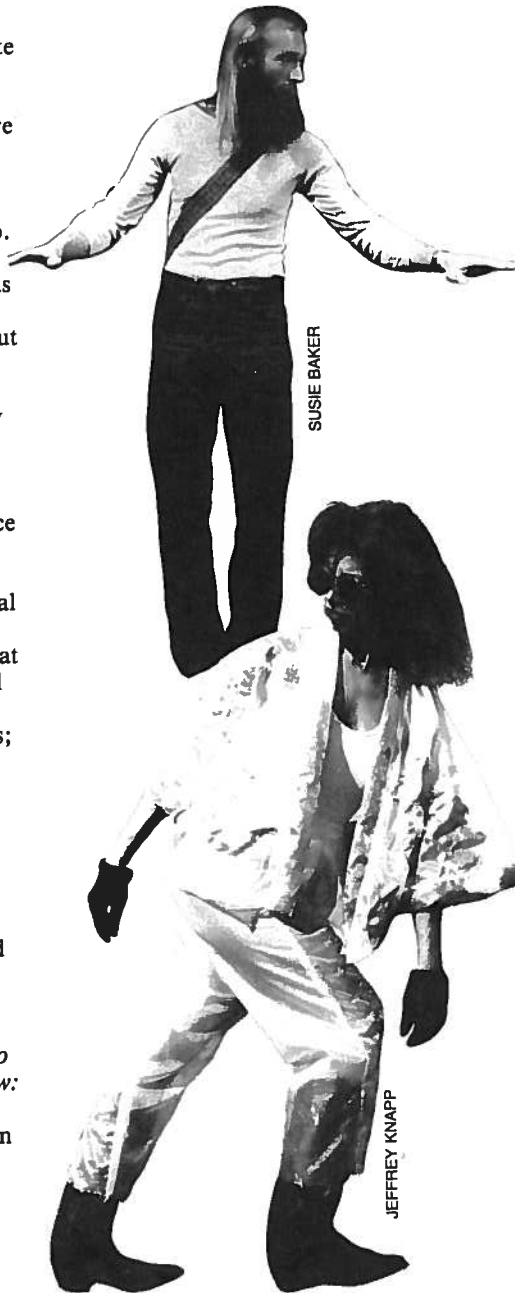
Whether or not Lerner's fears that regional theatre seasons reflects "corporate art for corporate America" are justified, it's true that an institutional theatre structure would not likely spawn the genre of outrageously irreligious clowning practiced by Atlanta's Southern Theatre Conspiracy or the richly human working class politics of that city's Jomandi group.

The work of these and other ROOTS companies often harks back to earlier eras of theatre—the medicine show, folk entertainments, vaudeville—and just about as often combines that sense of history with the eclectic styles and techniques of postmodernism. Performance artist Mary Luft of Miami, *The Road Company* of Appalachia and Atlanta's Seven Stages Company, among others, make pieces which emphasize a distinctive performance style over text and are intended to be performed by their creators, not by other ensembles in the manner of a conventional play.

The festival performances were staged at Nexus Theatre, a converted public school building on the fringes of downtown Atlanta, which houses the ROOTS offices; at Dancers' Collective, an elegantly renovated Art Deco theatre in the newly fashionable Little Five Points district; at Seven Stages, home of an experimental theatre collective; in the well-appointed Freedom Hall Theatre of the Martin Luther King Center; and, on two sunny afternoons, in Atlanta's broad-meadowed Piedmont Park. The week's outstanding moments included:

- Free Southern Theatre founder John O'Neal's one-man show *Don't Start Me to Talkin' or I'll Tell You Everything I Know: Sayings from the Life and Writings of Junebug Jabbo Jones*. O'Neal is a protean actor as well as a strong-minded political activist, and his collection of tales from the Deep South is at once hilarious and inspiring. The show has toured widely, and was at *Manhattan Theatre Club* for two weeks in November.

- South of the Mountain*, a powerfully understated new production by the *Roadside Theater*, a traveling company whose home is the central coalfields of southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky. A trio of Roadside's actor/storyteller/musicians traces the history of two generations of an Appalachian family as industrialization and modernization change the region and their way of life. Writer Ron Short's stories and original songs, based largely on recollections of his kin, range from the gently comic to the elegiac, and are deeply affecting. The show earned a standing ovation from a large, responsive audience that included National Endowment for the Arts chairman Frank Hodsoll and a delegation from the Georgia State Arts Council. Roadside gave *South of the Mountain* a



Musician and storyteller Tom Bledsoe of the Kentucky-based *Roadside Theater* and solo artist Mary Luft of Miami exemplify the range of performance at the Alternate ROOTS festival—from theatre with a traditional folk aesthetic to funky, urban performance art.

"home premiere" Nov. 19 at its own Appalshop Theater in Whitesburg, Ken.

- The Southern Theatre Conspiracy's *Some Things You Need to Know Before the World Ends: A Final Evening of the Illuminati*, a madcap theatrical inversion of a religious service complete with healings, miracles and responsive readings. STC's Eddie Lee and Larry Larson developed this gleefully irreverent piece and

perform it with high humor and dazzling physical inventiveness.

- A program of new dance by the Birmingham Creative Dance Company, featuring some charming and quirky choreography by Susan Hefner and a corps of interestingly varied young dancers. In her *Waking Dreams*, set in part to excerpts from Meredith Monk's masterful *Dolmen Music* (here poorly recorded), Hefner borrows ideas from Mummenschanz and Pilobolus, but ultimately makes an impact all her own. In the dance's closing sequence, a battery of pink ragdolls fly in the air like cheerleaders' pompoms, then are strung up on a criss-cross of clotheslines by Devo-style robots.

- Seven Stages' *The Return and Revenge of the Son of Mama/Dada*, a stylish, wordy and cheerfully obscene post-apocalypse musical by playwright Del Hamilton and composer Nick Asheland. *Mama/Dada's* surrealist staging takes a cue from New York's Squat Theater—a storefront window boldly extends the playing space into a busy street and beyond.

Several solo performers made an impact at the festival, including Mary Luft, who concluded her *Letter from Miami* by passing out black construction paper guns to the audience "so you'll feel safe when you come to visit me in Miami;" and writer Jo Carson, who gleaned her strikingly vivid *People Pieces* from everyday human encounters.

A panel of critics, including Marilyn Stasio of *The New York Post*, monitored the week's events and conducted informal critical sessions daily with the performers, reflecting Lerner's interest in a closer bond between artists and commentators on the arts. Offstage conversation often centered on finding alternative management and marketing styles compatible with alternative theatre operation.

"Why should theatre management be based strictly on the corporate business model?" Lerner asks rhetorically. "We're looking for new models which are less rigidly hierarchical and more participatory, along the lines of the agricultural cooperatives that have played a large part in southern history."

To encourage business and marketing possibilities, the ROOTS festival was scheduled during the same week that arts presenters and artists' representatives met in Atlanta for the Southern Arts Exchange booking conference, an annual arts trade-show. The mix—of both mutually supportive performance groups and new and potential audiences for their art—is the important part, Lerner says in retrospect.

"Now that the festival is over, we've been trying to decide whether or not ROOTS is more than the sum of its parts—and we decided it was," she adds with conviction. "The continuing dilemma is how to provide people with the resources they need." □