

TDR Comment

Art in and for a Democracy

Dudley Cocke

It's commonplace today to hear that democracy's future is at risk. And as

social media feeds us our daily diet of rancorous extremism, there is a growing recognition that culture is a central battleground for democracy's survival. What is missing, and what we need, is a cultural strategy to fight back.

The authoritarian Right has long understood that culture is upstream from politics. In his bid for the presidential nomination at the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas, Pat Buchanan put it this way:

My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in the country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. (Buchanan 1992)

Buchanan's declaration of the culture war was a direct challenge to the victories of the civil rights movement and all the other social justice movements that had sprung from it. There, too, culture played a central role. Beginning in the 1960s, artists across the US realized their communities shared the common plight of being exploited for profit by a relative few in powerful positions. They also recognized that prominent in the exploiter's playbook was the plan to replace a community's deep, distinctive histories and traditions with shallow, generic stereotypes. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o described this tactic as "the cultural bomb," intended "to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves" (1986:28). Once communities stopped believing in themselves, they could easily be played off against one another in the time-tested winning strategy of divide and conquer.

Seeing what was happening, many artists in these communities set about creating plays that investigated and celebrated their local history and cultural heritage. Their public performances engendered a new sense of personal and community pride. In the central Appalachian coalfields where I have lived most of my life, this realization and move toward reclamation brought a group of community-trained storytellers and musicians together in 1975 to form Roadside Theater—and two years later brought Roadside together with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Free Southern Theater, doing the same work in their home towns in the Black Belt South. This initial union between Roadside and the Free Southern Theater (which in 1980 became Junebug Productions) eventually grew into the American Festival Project, a national alliance with like-minded African American, Latino, Jewish, Asian, Appalachian, and Native American artists and ensembles.¹ Over the next 25 years, the American Festival Project produced 21 multiyear multicultural festivals

1. In addition to Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions, core members of the American Festival Project included Urban Bush Women (based in NYC), Pregones Theater (the Bronx, NYC), A Traveling Jewish Theatre (San Francisco), Jessica Hagedorn & Company (NYC), Idiwanan An Chawe (Zuni, NM), Carpetbag Theatre (Knoxville, TN), El Teatro de la Esperanza (Oakland, CA), Liz Lerman's Dance Exchange (Washington, DC), Robbie McCauley & Company (Boston, MA), and Francisco Gonzalez y su Conjunto (Santa Barbara, CA).

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Roadside Theater/Appalshop

Roadside Theater was founded in 1975 in the coalfields of central Appalachia as part of Appalshop. Appalshop started six years earlier as a War on Poverty job-training program in film production for youth. When federal funding stopped, Appalshop incorporated as a worker-run nonprofit and expanded into other art forms, eventually producing the largest single body of Appalachian art in the world.

The founders of Roadside Theater began by posing three questions: Could a small group of community-trained musicians, storytellers, and writers create a professional theatre in a place with no history of the same? Could the form and content of such a theatre be created from local sources? And finally: could the ensuing works of art appeal to people anywhere?

By 2018, when the ensemble's founders retired, Roadside had crisscrossed the country performing and conducting residencies. Now, five years later, Roadside and Appalshop have a new generation of leaders. appalshop.org

that demonstrated how people across race, class, religion, and rural-urban lines learn to turn away from fear and isolation, tell their own stories, and listen to the stories of their neighbors, both next door and far away.²

This work is now all but gone, and it is in danger of being forgotten. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), established at the height of the civil rights movement with the premise that “the arts and humanities belong to all the people of the United States,” was gutted in the 1990s in a bipartisan effort to privatize public goods, public services, public spaces, and public art (NEA 1965:1). The shift in US arts policy, which occurred as talk radio and Fox News were on the rise, effectively cut off grassroots, culturally specific performing arts ensembles from their national audience of racially diverse, economically poor, working-class, and middle-class people.³

Where does that leave us now, standing in the midst of a struggle for the soul of democracy?

A new book set, *Art in a Democracy: Selected Plays of Roadside Theater* (Cocke et al. 2023), takes up this question. The two volumes chronicle the theatre's successes and failures over 45 years of working in 2,000 communities across 48 states and 7 foreign countries. Nine original playscripts and 10 critical essays by authors from different generations and disciplines clarify how the work was done, and, while the books offer no short answers to how it might be done again, the editors pose three questions to consider when developing a strategy for the current struggle:

1. *Can the people's work be supported by the people's money?* (vol. 2:28)

Many people today have trouble imagining past the regime of imposed trickle-down scarcity that has dominated US public life and policy since the 1980s. But in the period from the 1930s through the 1970s, Democrats and Republicans alike supported programs that enabled artists to work with their neighbors to take the lead in addressing local challenges and opportunities. There is no reason this cannot happen again.⁴

2. Inclusion and patience were hallmarks of the festivals. For example, the Montana American Festival occurred over four years, 1992–1995, and was statewide.

3. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) coup de grâce occurred in 1995 and 1997, during the Clinton administration, when Congress eliminated all NEA grants to individual artists, along with the NEA's Presenting and Touring program and the multicultural Expansion Arts Program. Private foundations quickly followed the federal lead, eliminating their own touring and multicultural programs.

4. Democrats initiated the 1935–1943 Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs and the 1980 US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Neighborhood Self-Help Program, which offered flexible, open-ended assistance to neighborhood organizations. Republicans initiated the Labor Department's 1973–1982 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program to train disadvantaged adults for jobs in the public sector, including the nonprofit arts.

2. *Can communities struggling against exploitation build cultural, political, and economic power together?* (vol. 2:29)

Today, forces from across the political spectrum call on us to make a fetish of our differences: racist pseudo-populism on the Right, ideological cliquishness on the Left, and generic diversity/equity/inclusion efforts in the center. The orchestrated demise of so many of our local centers of power has made these divisive calls ever harder to resist. Yet here, as always, we can learn from those who came before us. Free Southern Theater director John O'Neal, one of Roadside's closest collaborators, often said he wished he had a hundred dollars for each time a well-intentioned white liberal confidently sidled up to him and opined that if we could only get rid of the rednecks, we could move ahead as a country. They were dumb-founded when he replied, "Those white rednecks you speak of are some of my closest allies."

3. *Will we maintain the patience, discipline, and energy to support one another and be ready when the next movement comes?* (vol. 2:29)

Our current social media-saturated moment is full of prematurely declared "movements," which turn out to be factional protest groups without enough public support to make lasting change. Being ready when the next real movement comes means creating the conditions for a critical mass of people and communities to see themselves in a common struggle for freedom and dignity. This has always been Roadside Theater's and its allies' intention: to end organized exploitation by affirming the value of each person's unique story and every community's distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional life; and to reveal the incomparable beauty and power of coming together in communion with neighbors close by and far away.

References

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