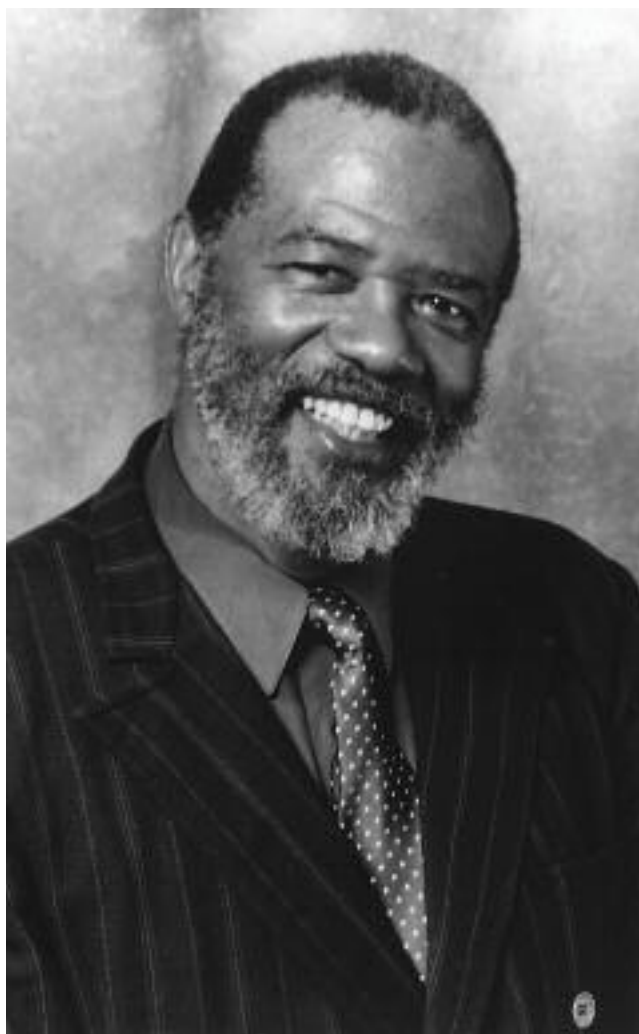


# INSIDE ARTS Q&A

## Talking and Telling

Can the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement help the country understand the social reverberations of Hurricane Katrina? John O'Neal lived through both and says artists have a role to play when it comes to disaster and social conscience.

**INTERVIEW BY ALICIA ANSTEAD**



IMAGES COURTESY JOHN O'NEAL

JOHN O'NEAL WAS NOT BORN IN NEW ORLEANS. He's from Pike County, Miss. But in the 1960s, deep in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement, he founded the Free Southern Theater, a politically and socially driven touring arts organization based in New Orleans and based on the same improvisational techniques as the city's jazz and blues. O'Neal has lived there ever since. The Free Southern Theater closed in the 1980s, but now he operates Junebug Productions in conjunction with Theresa Holden.

Still, his work is dedicated to community cultural development. In 2002, O'Neal and Holden won a Leadership for the Changing World Award for their Color Line Project, an archival collection of remembrances from the Civil Rights Movement. Junebug is a member of Alternate ROOTS (Regional Organization of Theaters South), which, in collaboration with Holden & Arts Associates, has developed a touring group of displaced Gulf Coast performers to perform work based on the devastation and survival after Hurricane Katrina. *Uprooted: The Katrina Project* was presented in June at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven, Conn.

At the festival, O'Neal performed his best known work *Don't Start Me to Talking or I'll Tell You Everything I Know*, a storytelling piece that began as reflections on his boyhood and has grown in the last 26 years to include the insights that come with age. O'Neal took a few minutes out of his schedule in New Haven to talk about the effect Katrina has had on his adopted city and on the arts. "I'm one of those who tend not to leave. My wife is just the opposite," he said. The O'Neals

cleared out from their Central City apartment the day before the hurricane hit and stayed in Dallas several weeks with family. One year later, the actor-writer-director continues to put the pieces of his life together—both on the ground and in his work. O’Neal, who was born in 1940, has a deep, gravelly voice. He could be a preacher or a favorite uncle who tells you like it is when others shrink away from the truth. One critic called it “tellin’ and testifyin’.” The rest of us call it art.

**ALICIA ANSTEAD:** You’ve been creating work based on community and events in the community from the very beginning. What drew you to this type of art rather than something more conventional?

**JOHN O’NEAL:** It’s not a distinction that I make. I was talking with my son yesterday and he had an insight about why everything I write seems to be about love. I was reflecting on that, and I was remembering that when I decided I was going to try to be a writer and write for the theater, I set out to do three broad things that are related to each other. One

country operates. We can’t have a whole lot of impact at this point on the economics of the situation because the people with money can play rougher, harder and with fewer restrictions than people who don’t have money. But we do have the sentiment of the people of the country, and indeed of the world, for just a moment here.

**ANSTEAD:** I thought we had that moment, too, on September 11th, and we squandered it.

**O’NEAL:** I think you’re right.

**ANSTEAD:** Have we squandered the Katrina moment yet?

**O’NEAL:** No, it’s not yet squandered, but it’s true we haven’t done as effective a job as we need to do. As the result of the Hurricane Fund and a bunch of other organizations now, a bunch of people in New Orleans are working their pants off actually and getting a lot done. I would daresay there are 10,000 volunteers in the city right now, a lot of them working on reconstruction, health issues and economics. But still the task is a huge organizing job. People don’t

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was to consider how people relate to each other in the social realm. Then, I thought there was something important about how people relate to the divine. And then, how we relate to each other in the realm of love and personal relationships with each other. These are three aspects of the same thing, and they all relate to social love. I thought that was enough to keep me busy for the rest of my life.

**ANSTEAD:** And so it has. You’ve also said that you are interested in finding out what people are willing to do without. What kind of answer did you get in the aftermath of Katrina? What are you, at this point in your life, willing to do without?

**O’NEAL:** I think we can do without just about anything as long we keep a sense of integrity, and as long as we have self-respect.

**ANSTEAD:** The images of Katrina that you carry with you and the experiences you have had in the last year—where are they sitting in your artist’s mind right now? Are you thinking about them? Putting them into your work? Where has all this taken you as an artist?

**O’NEAL:** Frankly, at the top of my agenda is another type of opportunity, if you will. I think the experience of this disaster reveals in a way more than anything we’ve had in the last 40 to 45 years, since the Civil Rights Movement. Everybody in the country has seen what happens as the result of racism, poverty and the environmental disaster that has already occurred as a result of our nation’s policies toward global warming and other ways of degrading the environment. There’s an opportunity here for people to reassert themselves in a social and political process by which the



know how to organize. People know more about how to fight with each other. Competition is prevailing over cooperation right now.

**ANSTEAD:** You worked so closely with the Civil Rights Movement, which I think of as being very well organized. How does Katrina compare?

**O'NEAL:** It's different because it's born of disaster. The movement was sitting on top of a long period of efforts to organize, and the need to organize was fairly clear. There were diverse opinions and strategies at work, but the NAACP and the Legal Defense Fund mobilized lots of small communities and big cities to get *Brown versus Board of Education* supported through the Supreme Court. There was a similar response to Montgomery in 1955 [with the bus boycott] that we see now to Katrina. You had that core group of people, a mobile force.

**ANSTEAD:** Do you think we had better leaders then?

**O'NEAL:** No, I think it was the structure of the situation. I don't

start thinking about how to address the effort in doable, bite-size pieces—one person, one character at a time. How do we create the kind of people that we need to be in order to get to this new world that I think most people want to get to?

**ANSTEAD:** What is the impact of Katrina on the arts locally and nationally?

**O'NEAL:** There is not a serious artist in town now who doesn't recognize that we have to put our art to work in helping people figure stuff out. We have to try to figure stuff out. And we have to promote the dialogue and support and encourage people not to give up but to keep on trying, and to examine the things that have led to the situation we are in now.

**ANSTEAD:** What is your best hope for New Orleans?

**O'NEAL:** It's going to be reconstructed and built back, I think. The best hope for me is that we find a way to make it a city that respects the unique culture that is created there: the food, the language, the arts. The only way for that to happen is to construct a body politic that is genuinely inclusive. ■

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think leaders make movements. Movements make leaders.

**ANSTEAD:** What lessons of the Civil Rights Movement do we need to be reminded of in regard to Katrina?

**O'NEAL:** Essentially, it's a question of getting a really broad agreement to work together despite differences. There are some people you can't pull in to work together, I'm sure—people who have really selfish and narrow views and desires. They want to see how they can personally benefit. There will be some of those. But even people who think they are in that place won't fail to be moved by the generosity that flows from people trying to help each other. It's building that broad, united effort. That's the key to getting through this thing.

**ANSTEAD:** What role do you think the arts play in helping us to understand not only the specific event of Katrina but also our sensibilities as a nation?

**O'NEAL:** It's the same role it has always played: It gives us baskets to put our thoughts in, our hopes and our dreams. Our lives come to us in a jumble. Our experiences don't immediately make sense. Every good director I've ever seen has said: *Don't tell an actor what not to do. Tell him what to do.* You can *not* do all types of things and *not* get anywhere. All the negative injunctions we find ourselves faced with don't help us orient ourselves. What we need to *do* as a people is start thinking affirmatively. What direction do we wish to go in? What kind of society *do* we wish to live in? What kind of people *do* we wish to be? And then try to frame our experiences in such a way that we can then begin to see the patterns, and

