

HELP YOURSELF

A Cultural
Workbook

WHAT IS ROOTS?

Alternate ROOTS was created in 1976 by a small group of southeastern performing artists who were creating original work in their own communities that addressed issues of social change. These artists sought to create a supportive artistic community and a network to share their resources: work, skills, information and criticism. ROOTS now has more than 250 members across the thirteen states of the Southeast, representing 55 nonprofit, community-based performing arts organizations and solo artists. Based in both rural and urban areas, ROOTS members include dance, mime and theatre companies, musicians, storytellers, clowns, new vaudevillians, playwrights, directors, choreographers and arts presenters.

MISSION STATEMENT

Alternate ROOTS is an organization based in the southeast whose mission is to support the creation and presentation of original performing art which is rooted in a particular community of place, tradition, or spirit.

ROOTS is committed to social and economic justice and the protection of the natural world and addresses these concerns through its programs and services.

The work of Alternate ROOTS and the publication of this workbook is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (InterArts, Theater, Expansion Arts and Advancement), the Georgia Council for the Arts, the Fulton County Arts Council, the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the Fund for Southern Communities, the Ruth Mott Fund and the Metropolitan Atlanta Community Foundation, by numerous individual contributions and by membership dues.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	i
Introduction.....	ii
Propositions and Exercises	
Developing and Supporting Our Artists.....	2
Reaching Audiences.....	6
Documentation.....	12
In Partnership with the Media.....	14
Strengthening Management.....	16
Policy.....	18
Summary of Propositions.....	20

PREFACE

This is a workbook. This is the first in a series of papers that Alternate ROOTS (Regional Organization of Theatres South) plans as a tool to promote dialogue about the development of a practical cultural policy for the future of the performing arts in the Southeast. We intend these periodic papers to prompt greater discussion both inside and outside ROOTS' membership. Their usefulness will be measured by their ability to provoke discussion and subsequent action in various areas of concern.

We are asking you, the reader, to cite examples, imagine strategies, and to comment on six areas pertinent to the development of a native body of plays, dances, music, vaudeville, mime, and performance art in the Southeast:

- Developing and Supporting Our Artists
- Reaching Audiences
- Documentation
- In Partnership with the Media
- Strengthening Management
- Policy

We put forward a few propositions in each area. After a brief discussion of each proposition, there is blank paper for you to respond. Our purpose is to stimulate a dialogue that will help artists, presenters, administrators and policy makers chart a new course which advocates equal opportunity for the diverse communities and people in our region. Use this workbook as a "jumping off" point for discussion among fellow artists, with funders, administrators, and policy makers.

Proceeds from distribution of this and subsequent papers will go to Alternate ROOTS, a nonprofit organization that for 13 years has served the performing artists creating original work in the region.

Thank you for your interest. We hope to hear from you.

Ruby Lerner and Dudley Cocke
Josephine Lindsley, Editor

INTRODUCTION

“Where are the South's best investments?” asks the Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South. The Commission was established by the Southern Growth Policies Board, a public interstate agency governed and supported by the state and local governments of the southeastern United States and Puerto Rico. Its board includes state governors, senators and representatives, as well as outstanding citizens from 13 southeastern states. The conclusion of the Commission was that **“the best way to buy shares of the future with guaranteed profit is to invest in the interdependent lives of Southerners themselves.”** Two of the Commission's ten interdependent objectives for 1992 are particularly helpful to a discussion of culture in the region. The first is implementing new economic development strategies aimed at home-grown businesses and industry, and the second objective is enhancing the South's natural and cultural resources.

The report, *Halfway Home and a Long Way to Go*, describes the South's current economic situation: for 25 years industry has come rolling down to the Sunbelt. But lately, the report asserts, (business) recruitment has been compared to the great buffalo hunts of the last century. The stampede is over; the herds are no longer plentiful, and 1986 would be a bad year to go into the buffalo hide business. At one time, our buffalo hunters sold the South as a low wage, low tax haven to northern plants that hurried to relocate. Now these industries are either modernizing or moving abroad in search of even lower taxes and lower wages.

On the positive side, the report points out that when the buffalo disappeared out west, the day of the cattlemen began. It suggests a similar approach for expanding the southern economy at this time. In order to develop home-grown businesses in the Southeast, it suggests that long term development strategies will need to be put into place, eschewing what appear to be quick fixes, that entrepreneurs

need to be encouraged, and that a variety of partnerships within the region between businesses and colleges and universities need to be strengthened.

This broad assessment of the current economic situation in the region and the suggestion of a partial solution in the cultivation of home-grown businesses has striking parallels to the region's current cultural situation: **the cultivation of home-grown performing artists and arts organizations can provide a new source of cultural energy and vitality as we face the next 20 years.** A partial explanation of the region's artistic history and current status will reveal these parallels.

As industries flocked to the Southeast, states and municipalities became increasingly concerned about the quality of life here. It was perceived that in order to attract high level executive and management personnel, the cultural amenities to which those executives were accustomed in their former locales also needed to be present here. Cultural organizations were formed with the help of citizens who felt that a museum, a theatre, or a symphony in their community would make the community more attractive to business interests. Many of the South's large performing arts centers and museums were built or expanded significantly during the last 25 years with corporate and local and state support. The task of most of these organizations was, and still is, to ensure that the Southeast has access to what is usually called "our universal cultural heritage," which, though connoting a broad perspective, has in practice meant art in the Western European tradition. To that end, the artistic focus of most of these organizations is on work drawn from the same vein and usually proven successful elsewhere, primarily in New York and London, whose inhabitants are seen as cultural arbiters.

☞ We can take pride in the fact that this network of arts organizations is now solidly in place, garnering significant

PROPOSITIONS
and
EXERCISES

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING OUR ARTISTS

Educators can provide participatory arts activities that encourage individual creativity.

Proponents of arts exposure believe that the primary purpose of an education in the arts is the training of future consumers--a philosophy that promotes passivity as a goal. Those who advocate participatory arts activities feel that all individuals possess creativity and therefore should have the opportunity to explore and develop their talents--a philosophy that advocates action as a goal. According to a recent survey by the Cleveland Foundation, exposure to the arts as a youth has little relationship to arts attendance as an adult. Participatory experiences have a much greater bearing on future attendance and participation.

Participatory arts programs can begin with that with which students are most familiar in order to help them begin a lifelong process of reflecting upon and engaging the world around them.

Do you know of some exemplary participatory arts programs?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for encouraging participatory arts programs?

1.

2.

Other comments:

Advanced training can be re-structured to prepare the region's artists with the range of skills necessary for self-reliance.

For what are young performing artists currently being trained? While the realities of making a life in the arts have shifted over the past 30-40 years, training has remained virtually the same, with the same outmoded goals: a job on Broadway, a role on a soap opera, a slot in the corps of the New York City Ballet, et al. Few jobs, and many qualified applicants for those jobs, often lead to empty careers. Passivity is bred--students learn to audition, to become perpetual employees in someone else's dream. Art students are not being prepared to create opportunities for themselves. These opportunities can lie in the creation of original art work reflecting contemporary life, the rediscovery of local histories, the portrayal of the dilemmas and joys of the people of the region.

The training curriculum in colleges and universities needs to be re-structured. Performing arts students should have the opportunity to write, direct, perform, acquire vaudeville and circus skills, dance, tell stories, sing, acquire media skills, and create collaboratively with other artists and non-artists. Since performing arts students will be expected to be creators of both art and organizations, they need to learn about researching issues and history, community organizing, urban and rural planning, and economic development.

At the center of this artistic training are the questions: What is the purpose of the work? How and whom is the work intended to serve?

Do you know of some exemplary training programs?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for training artists?

1.

2.

Other comments:

The artist-audience relationship needs scrutiny.

There can be no performing arts without an audience, and the mutual relationship that an artist and audience develop is as important to the artist's creative evolution as is study or imagination. Likewise, a community artist helps the community see itself more clearly.

If the creation is drawn from a particular community or constituency, it follows that building an audience should begin with the community from which the work is drawn. Thus, a play or dance about the southern, rural, black experience will get its most reliable viewing from, and generally be most useful to, a southern, rural, black audience.

The type of audience that is appropriate for an artist at home is likely to be the same audience that is appropriate for the artist's touring efforts. By clarifying the artist-audience relationship, its importance to the artistic process, and through arriving at successful methods for building a local audience, artists can communicate those methods to presenters in other locations.

support from local corporations, foundations, and individuals. However, a negative consequence of building these organizations has been the devaluation of our local and regional heritages.

The devaluing of the local and regional means that traditional southeastern cultural expressions--the varied musics of the region, storytelling, the tradition of excellence in crafts--have often been ignored by these new institutions and the funding structures, in spite of their consistent high quality and persistent popular appeal. It is not surprising that within this Western European context people of color are mostly excluded, nor that there is limited support for arts organizations whose commitment is to creating original work within a southern idiom.

A further consequence of this devaluing process is that it obscures a rich history of previous southeastern cultural achievements, a history that is important in properly evaluating the current situation.

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Beginning in the 1920s and through the 1960s, there were several cultural and social movements which grew in this region, and which were of national significance: The Carolina Playmakers, whose work extended from the '20s well into the '40s; the Fugitive Agrarians, writing in the '30s; Black Mountain College, founded in the '30s and continuing into the '50s; and the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s.

Vanderbilt University was home to a group of influential southern writers known as the Fugitive-Agrarians. While problematic on a number of fronts, their writing nonetheless called attention to the still timely issue of "the erosion of the quality of individual life by the forces of industrialization and

the uncritical worship of material progress as an end in itself." During its more than 20 years, Black Mountain College in North Carolina provided a base for a wealth of artistic experimentation which has influenced contemporary literature, visual arts, and performance. The cultural components of the southern-born Civil Rights Movement--its music and the Free Southern Theater--had a profound effect on subsequent generations of southern artists, black and white, in its vivid demonstration that culture is integral and not peripheral to the process of social change.

But it is perhaps the Carolina Playmakers which provides the most instructive example. In January of 1919, Professor Frederick Koch gave a lecture entitled "Playmakers of the People" on the Chapel Hill campus of the University of North Carolina. He declared that the primary purpose of the newly formed Carolina Playmakers would be the production of original plays dealing with North Carolina life and people. He argued: "When every community has its own native group of plays and producers, we shall have a national American theatre that will give a richly varied, authentic expression of American life. We shall be aware--which we are only dimly at present--of the actual pulse of the people." Koch's theatre continued with great vitality in the 1940s, guided by the belief that the local and specific, interpreted faithfully, can serve as a window to the universal--and that, in fact, this is the hallmark of all great art.

Koch's drama movement produced novelist Thomas Wolfe and Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Paul Green, as well as dance critic Walter Terry, bandleader Kay Kyser, novelist Betty Smith, former Wall Street Journal editor Vermont Royster, and others. On the 25th anniversary of the Playmakers in 1943, a noted theatre historian stated that "the best way to estimate the significance of the movement known as the Playmakers Theatre is to try to imagine what American

playwrighting would have been for the last 25 years without them."

Today this dynamic movement which lasted 25 years is, at best, a distant memory, rarely discussed, and described in a standard theatre text as only "influential." It has been replaced by college and university drama departments which appear more interested in producing actors who can read soap opera copy and meet the requirements for auditions in New York City. Remaining in the Southeast in order to create work that might be useful to the life of the region is not presented as an option to today's student.

.....

While our point of view encourages the local and regional, we are not promoting a regionalism that is either quaint or parochial, but one that is expansive in the way that Koch defined it in the early part of the century, and in the way that Kentucky writer and farmer Wendell Berry describes it in his contemporary essay, "The Regional Motive:"

The regionalism that I adhere to could be defined simply as local life aware of itself. It would tend to substitute for myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in.

Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed. I look upon the sort of regionalism that I am talking about not just as a recurrent literary phenomenon, but as a necessity of civilization and survival.

Berry goes on to say that it is important to be able to "bring to bear on the life of one's place all that it is possible to know." This view advocates exchange and dialogue among

communities within and outside the region, as well as exchange with other cultures. Art from outside the community is not, however, presented in the spirit of "how art really should be done." Instead, one learns about other cultures and communities in order to better understand one's own community and culture.

What are the forces that oppose this encompassing localism? Philosopher Sheldon Wolin contends that

the major structures of power in this society, whether business, education, finance, the military, government, or communications, require, as a condition of the effective use of power, the destruction or neutralization of persons or places. Persons and places are more likely to survive if they repress their local peculiarities, surrender old rhythms of life and the accompanying skills, and fashion themselves anew to accommodate the abstract requirements of assembly lines, data processing and systems of impersonal communications.

☛ While art from elsewhere may be purchased, culture is something that we will have to create for ourselves. This responsibility is no different than our responsibility for the way our region's land and natural resources are used, or for our future economic prospects. Just as an infusion of monetary support, creating long term development strategies, building relationships with academia, and encouraging entrepreneurs are seen as necessary for creating a viable home-grown economy, similarly, an infusion of the same kinds of support will help home-grown artists and organizations become a powerful source of catalytic energy to their communities, large and small, throughout the region.

Do you know of some exemplary artist-audience relationships?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for enhancing the artist-audience relationship?

1.

2.

Other comments?

Presenting native work offers established sponsors the opportunity to reach a broader audience. At the same time, new sponsors and audiences need to be developed.

There already exists a network of presenters in colleges, in our cities, and in a few small towns throughout the region serving primarily a white collar audience. These established sponsors are often blind to important new work that has not been successful outside the region. Experience has shown, however, that programming regional and local work can open up their organizations to more people in their community.

We need to concentrate on developing presenters and audiences in our rural, minority, and inner city communities. Given that a new sponsor, whether rural, black, Latino, or inner city, will generally require more subsidy than an experienced presenter, programs need to be started which ensure that the greater needs of the new and developing sponsors are met. It is the artists' and companies' responsibility to articulate to the presenter for what audience the presentation is intended and how the presentation is expected to be useful to that audience.

Do you know of some exemplary presenting organizations?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for reaching new audiences through diversified programing, and for locating new presenters serving rural, black, Latino, and inner city audiences?

1.

2.

Other comments:

Touring is another way of reaching new audiences, and of invigorating artistic exchange and community dialogue both within and across regional boundaries.

Touring can provide the kind of cultural cross-fertilization that deepens different communities' understanding of one another. Touring allows artists to see the life and understand the issues of communities outside of their region. It is important that touring artists clarify their objectives prior to undertaking such tours, and that those objectives are conveyed to the out-of-region presenter.

Presenters should ask themselves: How will presenting this work be useful to the community? How will it enhance community dialogue after the artists have gone? How will local artists benefit from the presence of artists from elsewhere?

Do you know of some exemplary touring programs?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for encouraging touring that awakens the community to its own history and creative impulses, or to enhance dialogue about certain issues?

1.

2.

Other comments:

DOCUMENTATION

It is important that we pass on to succeeding generations the history of southeastern culture in all its diversity of forms, themes, and personalities.

The rich diversity of southeastern art that has been produced is not adequately reflected in art history books or conveyed through other forms of documentation. Without knowledge of this history, cultural workers struggle to understand their current situation. Today exciting native artistic work continues to be produced, but it remains poorly documented. The problem is aggravated by the breakdown of our region's oral tradition, heretofore a powerful conveyor of history and heritage, and is further exacerbated by the fact that the popular media is dominated by the tastes and judgments of small groups in a few large cities.

Do you know of some exemplary documentation projects?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for researching and passing on the history and development of southeastern performing arts, and for including documentation efforts in existing arts events?

1.

2.

Other comments:

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

We need to develop a useful arts criticism.

There needs to be more and better writing about performing arts activities in the region, reporting which places the work in a local and regional artistic and social context. Therefore, like artists, critics should be well versed in a wide range of issues facing the community and region. A goal of arts criticism should be to help the audience member and the artist to develop his or her own critical faculties. The critic can be a partner with both artist and audience in an exploration of the work.

In order for meaningful criticism to occur, artists must take responsibility for articulating the criteria for judging their work. Otherwise they will become victims of the criteria established by others. Publishers and editors must be willing to encourage the critical function of arts writing as distinct from the marketing function of reviewing.

Do you know of some exemplary partnerships among artists, media, and audiences?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for improving critical dialogue about original work being created by southeastern performing artists?

1.

2.

Other comments:

STRENGTHENING MANAGEMENT

Management decisions are not value-free; they affect artistic process and purposes.

Most of the arts management assistance offered over the past three decades has promoted hierarchical organizational structures, use of strategies practiced by large businesses, and use of the tools of mass marketing. We need to understand how these structures and strategies affect the art that we produce.

An organization's unique mission, goals, and creative processes must serve as the guide to evolution of an appropriate management structure and as a guide for the acceptance, rejection, or modification of the use of specific strategies and tools. We are now seeing an awakening to a diversity of management structures in the business community, well-documented in books such as Reinventing the Corporation by John Naisbett and Patricia Aburdene. More opportunities for exploring arts management issues and for leadership training are needed, opportunities that value a diversity of organizational structures and strategies.

Do you know of some exemplary arts management structures?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for developing arts management alternatives and leadership training programs?

1.

2.

Other comments:

POLICY

Cultural work is an essential part of a progressive regional agenda.

The Southern Growth Policies Board's report, "Halfway Home and a Long Way To Go," explains:

The sunshine on the Sunbelt has proved to be a narrow beam of light, brightening futures along the Atlantic Seaboard, and in large cities, but skipping over many small towns and rural areas....Our need is not so much for greater charity from one neighbor to another, but for greater parity to bring forward all the South's neighborhoods at once.

There are a number of social and political organizations in the region promoting the kind of community-based agendas necessary for economic and social parity. At the core of the community-based agenda is the principle that regional development must be done by, not to people. We need to ensure that southeastern artists, including women and people of color, those from rural communities and the inner city, are equal partners in regional and local policy making. Artists should be included in the discussion of social and economic policy issues; conversely, individuals working for economic and social parity should help artists formulate cultural policy.

Are you familiar with any exemplary cultural policy forums?

1.

2.

Can you imagine strategies for including cultural work as an integral part of a progressive regional agenda?

1.

2.

Other comments:

SUMMARY OF PROPOSITIONS

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING OUR ARTISTS

- Educators can provide participatory arts activities that encourage individual creativity.
- Advanced training can be re-structured to prepare the region's artists with the range of skills necessary for self-reliance.

REACHING AUDIENCES

- The artist-audience relationship needs scrutiny.
- Presenting native work offers established sponsors the opportunity to reach a broader audience. At the same time, new sponsors and audiences need to be developed.
- Touring is another way of reaching new audiences, and of invigorating artistic exchange and community dialogue both within and across regional boundaries.

DOCUMENTATION

- It is important that we pass on to succeeding generations the history of southeastern culture in all its diversity of forms, themes, and personalities.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

- We need to develop a useful arts criticism.

STRENGTHENING MANAGEMENT

- Management decisions are not value-free; they affect artistic process and purposes.

POLICY

- Cultural work is an essential part of a progressive regional agenda.

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For a full copy of the report *Halfway Home and A Long Way to Go*, call or write: Southern Growth Policies Board, P.O. Box 12293, Research Triangle Park, NC, 27709; (919) 941-5145. 1-3 copies are free, additional copies are \$1.00 each.

Thanks for your participation. We hope this has been a useful exercise for you and other members of your community. We would appreciate your sharing your responses with us, so we may share them with others doing similar work.

Please send us your remarks and comments.

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\$2.00