

# Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project Newsletter

Robin Veder, Editor

Welcome to the Grassroots Theater Project! This project is a collaboration between Williamsburg residents, students of the College of William and Mary, and the Roadside Theater Company. Together we are making a play about Williamsburg during the Civil Rights era. How? Folks who have stories to tell about that time are sharing them with students, who will then work with Roadside Theater and the Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project's steering committee to create a show about our own local history. We are excited to have Carol Talbot, Shade Palmer, Joanne Braxton, Richard Sherman, Eric Heinen, and Lisa Rayner on our steering committee. The final production will occur in April 1996.

This project is being sponsored by Neighborhood Connections of James City County, the Williamsburg Regional Library, the Community Action Agency, the JCC Historical Commission, the Citizens for Community Progress and Alternate ROOTS.

We had a great opening weekend. On September 8 and 9, Roadside Theater from the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky and Junebug Theater Project from New Orleans, Louisiana, performed JUNEBUG/JACK, a piece they made together. JUNEBUG/JACK was created from the stories of real people, stories about the similarities and differences between the lives of Southern rural African American and Appalachian people. Storytelling and song are woven together with local history. The audience enjoyed seeing both tall tales of heroic high jinks, and the tragic but familiar stories of everyday oppression.



*Junebug Productions and Roadside Theater performers (left to right) Shawn Jackson, Kim Neal, Kenneth C. Raphael, and Nancy Smith in JUNEBUG/JACK.*

Roadside Theater is a traveling ensemble company that is part of Appalshop, a nonprofit arts and educational

organization in the Appalachian Mountains. Roadside has been making theater from oral history since 1975. Roadside's goal for theater residencies, like this collaboration with Williamsburg residents and students, is "to strengthen community resources through the celebration of local life."

Junebug Productions grew out of the Free Southern Theater, which was founded in 1963 as an instrument of the civil rights movement. Junebug Theater is also nationally recognized, and has participated in many collaborative efforts. Although Junebug will not be a continuing participant in the Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project, we applaud and share their mission "to create and present theater which supports and encourages those who work to end oppression and exploitation . . ."

After the performances on Friday and Saturday nights, we had the first of what we hope will be many story circles. In groups of 14-22, we adjourned to the rooms of the Williamsburg Library. One by one, we shared our memories of specific events that moved us or angered us or made us think about our world a little differently. Each person spoke for a few minutes while the others listened respectfully, for in the story circle every story is equally important. Sometimes, one story would spark another person's memory, and the group would break out into a chorus of voices suddenly excited by this reclaimed memory. In the next few months, we hope to reconvene in smaller groups so that there will be more time for shared reminiscences. If you would like to host or participate in a story circle, please contact Bruce McConachie (221-2668) or Robin Veder (253-8097).

Several members of the audience were excited about the Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project, but unsure of how they might fit in. "I didn't move here until 1974." "I wasn't born until 1975." "I want to help, but I don't think I have a story for you." There are lots of ways to get involved with this project if you feel moved to participate. We need people to talk to their friends, neighbors, and co-workers about the project. We need hosts for story circles. We need local history researchers. In the springtime, we'll probably be looking for performers, singers, musicians, and storytellers.

We all know how important early American history is to this town. But what about recent history? What about the events that happened twenty or thirty years ago, events which still shape our lives? Isn't it time for the students of the college to recognize and respect the wisdom of Williamsburg residents? This time, local history will come from the mouths of the people who lived it. Here's an opportunity to write your own history the way that you saw it. Remember, if someone else tells your story for you, they'll probably get it wrong.

For more information, please contact Bruce McConachie (221-2668) or Robin Veder (253-8097) c/o Williamsburg Grassroots Theater Project, Department of Theater and Speech, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187.