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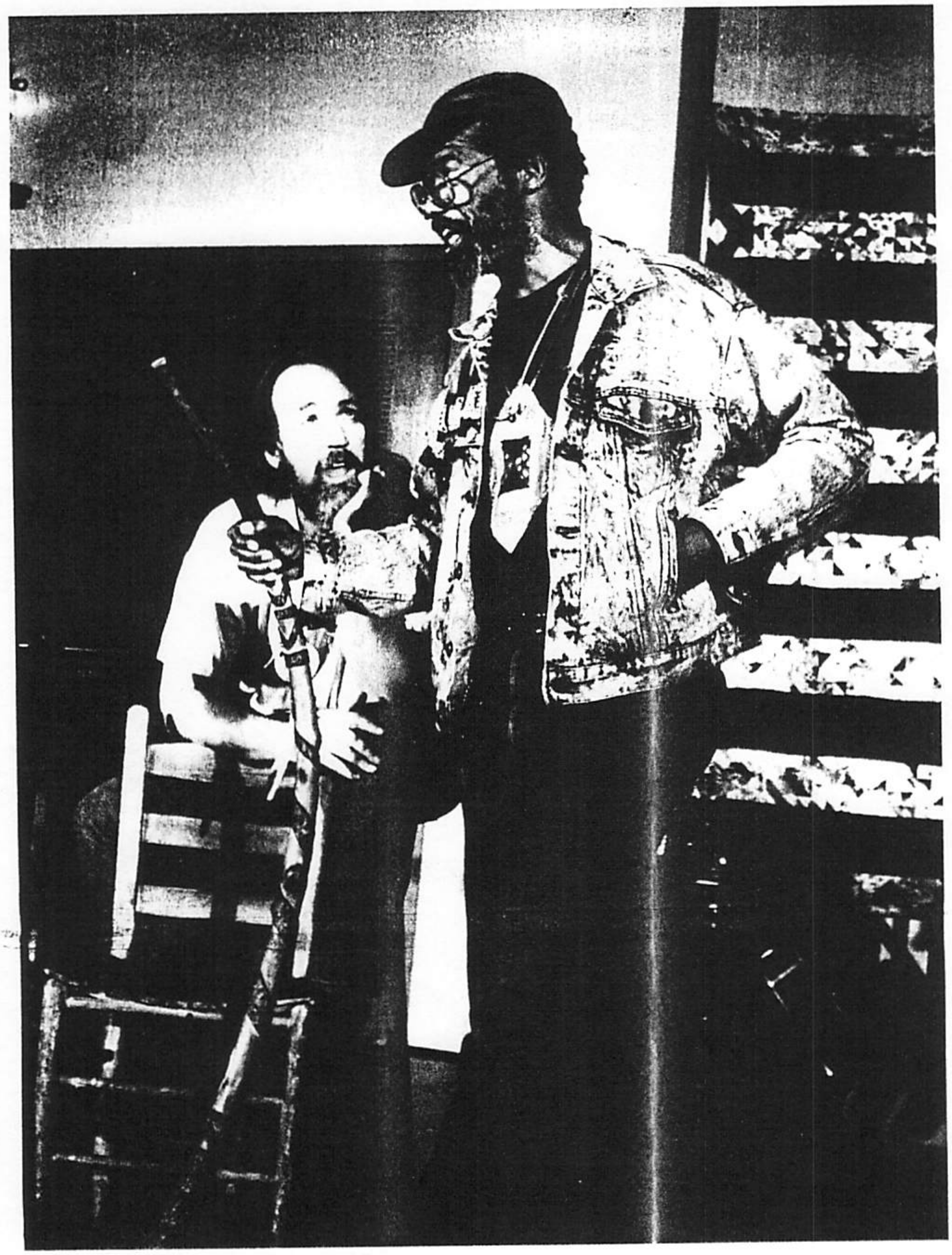

From left to right: [illegible] Short and [illegible] in a workshop in Elizabeth City with the Elizabeth City State University [illegible] member of [illegible] Theater [illegible] collaborative effort called Looking/Jack, have been part of a two-year community art project in northeastern North Carolina.

Photograph: Cedric Chatterly

# THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Journeys with the people of northeastern North Carolina to [illegible] the arts and prove their strength

What follows is a travel album pieced together by many hands. The first and penultimate passages are drawn from the notes of Nancy Trovillion, associate director of the North Carolina Arts Council. The others are attributed in turn, as they appear.

A week in August, 1991. Local craftspeople have brought things they made to the Moyuk Elementary School gymnatorium, in Currituck County, and put them on exhibit: doll-houses, taxidermy, photographs, quilts. Local performers (a pianist, a gymnast, a clogger, and two traditional musicians) are also on hand. They meet with members of two national in workshops and presentations how to make theater a fellowship that's truly of and for the people.

The state arts council's job was to keep the work of all the hubs in synchrony with the project's mission and budget. Probably most important, the council's job was to pay for the project. The National Endowment for the Arts gave the state two grants (in consecutive years) totalling more than $70,000. In turn, the council gave each committee a grant to pay honoraria for the hub coordinators, to cover the costs of travel to meetings, office supplies, and other incidental expenses, and to underwrite good local publicity efforts. Out of the NEA grant the council also paid travel and production costs of the two companies. These were by far the largest expense, given the number of people (twelve), the number of their trips to the state, and the length of their stays. Finally, with the NEA money the council was able to pay a regional project coordinator. Lottie Lassiter is a Northeast native and executive director of a lively community theater: the Gallery Theatre, in Ahoskie. It fell to her to watch over the work of the different hubs and make regular reports to the state council.

The long months of planning were punctuated in August, 1991, by eight days of nonstop travel. At that point, Roadside and Junebug came to the Northeast to begin their collaborations with local people. (This article begins with scenes from the August visit.)

Junebug/Jack members spent time in each hub. They met with the hub committees and networks of other interested people. They talked and performed with local artists. They visited schools, arts centers, community organizations—wherever people with different points of view gathered. From these exchanges a design for each of the upcoming extended residencies emerged organically. The crew worked hard to show that the project's deepest purpose was for people to connect with one another in ways that might become permanent. Story swaps made the point beguilingly, and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" was sung more than once.

Even then, six months before the grand tour of the Junebug/Jack Company, the state arts council was finding itself on surer footing in the Northeast. For one thing, the potential for stability in several struggling arts councils had come to seem higher on close look than it had from a distance. For another, the hub committees and coordinators had stirred up the artists and groups they worked with. People in Gates County, for example, had begun to gather strength to start an arts council there. Finally, as the North Carolina Arts Council's staff became more familiar with the Northeast and developed new relationships there, they were finding ways to make the council's grants more responsive to the situations of poor and rural applicants. There was more still for everyone to discover.

Carol Thompson, who was Junebug/Jack's Northeast project producer, kept a record of the company's extended tour last April. Each day was full and varied. The following selected passages should provide a glimpse of what went on.

[illegible] Thompson's diary,
[illegible]

Twelve of us in all took part in the "Junebug/Jack" tour in North Carolina. Dudley Cocke is the director. Ben Mays is our road manager and technical director. I'm the producer. The Junebug performers in the ensemble are Michael Keck and John O'Neal. From Roadside there are Tommy Bledsoe, Kim Cole, Angie DeBord, Nancy Jeffrey, and Ron Short. Michael and Ron composed music for "Junebug/Jack." Two guest performers are with us, too: Rhonda and Sparky Rucker (and James, their newborn son), from Knoxville, Tennessee. (They help us out in Ahoskie until John and Michael, who are performing elsewhere for Junebug, can join us.) Like the rest of the ensemble, Sparky and Rhonda teach as well as perform traditional music and storytelling.

Each member of the ensemble is a skillful workshop leader, but each has different strengths, so we'll be able to adapt our learning sessions well to a variety of situations. Each member can sing and play at least one instrument, if not more. And each can perform any role in any story.

[illegible]

We're in the town of Ahoskie, surrounded by the pine forests that feed the region's paper mills. We arrive at Hertford County High School, where we expect to spend time over three days with a tenth-grade English class discussing storytelling and oral tradition. Our contact is the teacher, Willie Williams, who attended one of our introductory performances in the region last August.

Upstairs her classroom is full of students: her regular class and also the senior English class from next door. The students joke with us as we unpack instruments and introduce ourselves. Sparky and Tommy launch into the chorus of "Get on Board, Children" and everyone responds enthusiastically. We use the music as a history lesson and talk with the classes about the underground railroad. We also discuss the many contributions black people have made to American music: the blues, the banjo, the slide guitar, and the harmonica. Tommy and Kim tell the classes a bit about Appalachian culture and demonstrate our storytelling style with the popular Jack tale, "Johnny Sorenavel." (A giant gives Jack this name while holding him captive. Aside from its mountain setting, the story mirrors Homer's account of Odysseus's contentions with Cyclops.)

The students are entertained but don't see a connection to their schoolwork. Sparky speaks of the importance of discovering who we are and where we come from. Only a few hands are raised when we question the students about their own history. We agree to spend the next two days exploring what they know and how they can find out more.

We begin with Ms. Williams's tenth-graders. Sparky introduces John, the trickster character popular in African American stories, and tells "This and That," a story of how John gets his freedom. Tommy explains that these popular folk heros, the African American "John" and the Appalachian "Jack," are "Everyman" representations that occur in many cultures. In fact, he says, when he was a boy in white Appalachia his grandfather told him a story about a fellow just like John in Sparky's story. The students recognize the trickster and recall similar characters from the literature they've studied in class.

We talk about oral traditions and how stories and songs are passed around communities and from generation to generation. What stories have the students heard from family and community members? A quiet young man speaks about his family's Cherokee background and how he and his dad play music together that tells of their history. As we leave the building, Ms. Williams tells us that he has rarely participated in class.

This is our last day at Hertford High School. We decide to work with the tenth-graders for the first half-hour and then invite the senior English class back for the last.

We discuss as a group how we learn from everyday experiences, both at school and in our communities. Then we list who we can learn from: teachers, family, friends, community members, people of different backgrounds.

When the seniors join us, Tommy and Sparky remind everyone that we spent the past few days looking at how we learn about who we are, and celebrating our differences as well as what we have in common. Sparky sings the old-time tune "Pretty Polly," about the fate of a girl who gets too close to a dangerous man. Kim and Tommy know a different version and perform it in the ensemble's storytelling theater style. Sparky joins in at the end and the three finish the story with the last verse of the song.

It's Friday evening at the Gallery Theatre. In the lobby, local artists are showing examples of what they do: wool spinning, wood carving, Native American beading and feather decoration, and musical instrument-making. Art work by schoolchildren adorns the walls. In the audience and among the performers there are African Americans, Native Americans, whites, young people, and elder citizens.

Celestine and Mike Richardson, and other dancers from the local Meherrin tribe, open with their traditional pipe ceremony, then demonstrate fancy and traditional dancing. Mike asks the audience to come up for a two-step, a

[illegible] John O'Neal with schoolchildren at C.S. Brown Cultural Center in Winton. Below: [illegible]

Photographs: Cedric Chatterly

dance the tribes learned from early European settlers. Once the exuberant dancers are back in their seats the Roadside performers entertain with Appalachian stories and songs. Then with John and Michael they do some songs from "Junebug/Jack." After a brief intermission, John introduces the character of Junebug and gets people in the audience to help him tell a story. Members of the local Gospel Ensemble —Mary Herald, Josephine Combo, Kathy Artis, and Chenita Lee, with Darryl Morris singing and playing piano—close out this special evening with soaring voices. The audience joins hands in a continuous line, row to row, front to back, for the hymn, "I Don't Want to Run this Race Alone."

April 5th to [illegible] Halifax and
Northampton counties
Coordinator: Janet [illegible]
of Roanoke Rapids

Day [illegible] In Tillery we meet with seniors at an old store turned community center. Library shelves full of books line two walls, a wood stove in the center of the room takes the chill out of a spring afternoon, there's a large kitchen, and the back rooms have converted into a clinic. We learn that the center is involved in environmental issues, a summer youth camp, and cultural exchanges between adults and children.

Many who have come this afternoon met us at the Halifax library in August and are familiar with our work. John suggests we arrange the chairs in a large circle. Once everyone is settled he convenes the council, explaining that we've gathered to learn about one another and encouraging everyone to share whatever they'd like with the group. As we move about the council circle we hear many similiar stories and concerns: about hard times on small farms; about having to move away to find work; about retiring, returning home, and finding that home isn't the same. There's concern for today's young people who are making their lives away from Tillery, and what they'll return to, or if they'll return. The chance to talk comes around to a woman everyone calls Ma Sue. She's ninety-one years old, has raised twenty children, has more than a hundred grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and enjoys working in her garden. Her views and stories are esteemed by the others. She responds to their request for a song with a rendition of "This Little Light of Mine," in a voice still deep and resonant. The circle breaks into smaller groups, and stories and songs continue through the afternoon.

April [illegible] to 11th
Perquimans, Pasquotank, and
Currituck counties
Coordinator: Murphy Moss
of Edenton

Day 11 We're at a meeting in the town of Hertford (which is in Perquimans County, not Hertford). Most participants are members of Bootstrap Players, a theater group. Several have lived in the area all their lives and we hear some wild tales from the old days about driving up the frozen river, drinking moonshine, and playing in the sawmill and on the train tracks.

The group wants to know about collecting oral histories and scripting stories. We share our experiences and offer them encouragement, for they have a wealth of material readily available to them. Before we go they decide to work out a regular time to get together to hear and collect stories, and are discussing performing the stories at summer festivals and other community gatherings.

[illegible] with Mary Herald's [illegible] Photograph: Cedric Chatterly

[illegible] Our only full production of "Junebug/Jack" on this tour is tonight, at Elizabeth City State University. We spend the morning in a workshop with the Elizabeth City State University Choir. The students are talented musicians and have agreed to perform with us tonight. This is our first meeting. We're knocked out by the choir's terrific sound and arrangements. John talks to them about music and singing as part of the civil rights movement, and shares some personal stories. All sing together and then we leave to rehearse.

Our host at Elizabeth City State University is Willie Sullivan, head of the music department. In the evening, Professor Sullivan welcomes everyone to the performance and introduces the choir, which files on stage in robes and stirs the audience with both gospel and classical selections. We get a warm response to "Junebug/Jack," too, and lots of people stay around afterwards to talk. Dr. Sullivan says he and the choir want to tour the region and do more community performances.

Day 11 Nancy and Ron, of Roadside, must leave the tour today. John and Michael, of Junebug, leave us, too, to honor a commitment at Elon College. Members of the Tulles Creek Players, a theater group in Currituck County, have arranged to meet with the rest of us and talk about their programs. We hear about plans for a new arts center at the school that will be available to the community. The group wants to explore local cultural traditions and include community-based arts and fine arts in the new center's programming. We talk together about how to involve the community in this planning phase and the state arts council staff describes programs that can help.

[illegible] Ocracoke Island
[illegible] Merle Smith [illegible]

[illegible] Albert Styron's store has a reputation as a community gathering place. For many years local musicians have come together at the store to play music. We arrive early and arrange borrowed chairs around displays of groceries and local crafts. An open invitation has been issued, and we don't know who's coming or what they can play until they arrive. It turns out to be an eclectic mix of acoustic and electric instruments ranging from the spoons to an electronic percussion board but including banjo, fiddle, guitars, and bass. We spend several enjoyable hours playing, singing, listening, and dancing to a variety of folk music. Young children scamper through the crowd, then settle down on laps to listen. The music goes on into the night.

Our Ocracoke visit concludes with a community celebration. School lets out at noon for Easter break, and everyone gathers at the church next door to share sandwiches and sweets. Then we assemble in the gym for an auction (to raise money for school programs) and entertainment. The kindergarten and first-grade classes have put together a seaside Okracoke version of a Roadside mountain story that delights the crowd. Old-time fiddler Laughton Howard and guitarplayer Ray Parsons strike up a tune, and Roadside gets everyone up and square dancing. Too soon it's time to go. We head down the road to the ferry to Hatteras, then to mainland North Carolina, and finally to the mountains of home.

rom the first year of the "Junebug/Jack" project to the next, state grant money for arts groups in the Northeast rose from $117,594 to $248,298 —more than doubling. The jump reflects the $70,000 spent on the project itself. But it also reflects the success of the connections that state arts council staff members and groups in the region were able to make as a result of the tour. The new money the Northeast has been able to claim is evidence of a new consciousness in northeastern communities of their own creative strength.

Since the tour the state arts council has given an extensive assignment in the region to Nayo Barbara Malcolm Watkins, former manager of the African American Dance Ensemble and an experienced advisor on diversity and collaborative efforts in the arts. She's had face-to-face visits with most of the groups involved in the Northeast tour and has spent two days with them together in retreat. Two basic questions have guided these meetings: What does each group want for its community? What help does each group need to grow stronger individually and in partnership with others?

The answers are still coming and they vary. But from them a new project is taking shape. This one could bring the Junebug/Jack folks back to the Northeast for a concentrated effort in several of the communities they visited before. The goal isn't to tell people in the Northeast what needs to be done, and do it for them. Northeasterners will decide for themselves what they want to do, and tell Junebug/Jack how to help.

[illegible] "Our area wasn't used to cooperating on arts programs. Each county and group normally went its separate way. Through the project local artists were given a forum and encouragement; theaters and other presenting groups became enthusiastic about working together. Senior citizens and young people were surprised to find how they could learn from each other. Planning groups see how they might cooperate in future ventures, giving support to each other."

[illegible] "A couple of older fellows came to the square dance who hadn't performed in the community for years. I found out that one man, whom I hadn't known was musical at all, is a yodeler!"

Janet [illegible]
director Halifax [illegible]

"Most students and many adults had never seen our local Haliwa Saponi tribe perform. Now they have."

[illegible]

"Classes are tracked here and I teach all levels. Children are very aware of the differences. The Junebug/Jack people chose to come to my class of slower learners. Programs like that don't usually happen in slow classes. My kids said, 'Ms. Williams, out of all your classes, why did they choose us?' They felt honored."

[illegible] "I see new faces in the audiences at Gallery. Some kids took part in our children's theater workshop this summer whose parents heard about us because of the Junebug/Jack events. Mary Herald [of the Gospel Ensemble] and I got to know each other well in April, and now she's going to be in our production of 'Nunsense' [in a role that wasn't intentionally written for a black woman]. She'll be wonderful!

"Something else happened because people who didn't know each other well were working together to plan the tour. We have a network of theaters now. Just this morning I was on the phone to Encore, in Elizabeth City, trying to get some help with costumes for 'Nunsense.' I'd never heard of that company until the tour.

"I have a good dream. There's a theater in Manteo, two in Elizabeth City, one in Edenton, one in Hertford, and one in Currituck—enough to have a small regional theater festival. Wouldn't that be fantastic?"

touring theater companies and, together, plan an impromptu evening program. The show begins. Everyone performs and seems to have a good time doing it. The forty-some people who've come to watch are having a good time, too. All join hands to sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?". The time for theater has ended, but the fellowship isn't so abruptly stopped. Long into the night, the newcomers and the old friends keep chatting, singing, playing, and telling stories.

The C.S. Brown Cultural Center, in Winton, is the site of the first school to provide higher learning for black young people in North Carolina. When children, high school students, and senior citizens come together there with the touring theater group one morning, they choose to sing "Amazing Grace." One of the visiting actors has everyone hum the tune while he tells the story of a British slave trader who had a change of heart. It was this man, the actor says, who composed the hymn and left us his testimony of a spiritual miracle.

For a week in the summer of 1992, the touring theater people took part in gatherings like these. Seven months later they returned. Much had happened in northeastern North Carolina in preparation for their first visit, and much would happen before their second. An awakening was in the air.

he sixteen counties of the Northeast compose the most culturally isolated and economically depressed region in North Carolina. The Northeast has the state's highest rate of infant mortality. It also has the largest number of school dropouts. Young people find themselves pushed out of the area to find work, and as they go the average age of the Northeast's population climbs. The region is historically agricultural, but the number of farms is shrinking. In the absence of significant business investment, the averages of family and per capita income are declining, too.

As of 1990, the grant money that the North Carolina Arts Council dispensed to the Northeast worked out to thirty-seven cents a person—only slightly more than half the per capita average for the state as a whole. With few organizations strong enough to apply directly to the council for grants, most of the arts money that reaches the Northeast comes from the Grassroots Arts program—a line-item appropriation in the council's budget that's pegged to each county's population. (The combined population of the Northeast's sixteen counties is only 325,000.)

Even this money has been hard to spend. Eighty-one of the state's hundred counties

[illegible] Bledsoe of [illegible]

Photograph: Cedric Chatterly

have arts councils approved by the North Carolina Arts Council to distribute Grassroots money for local arts activities. Of the nineteen counties without such agencies, eight are in the Northeast. The state arts council itself must distribute money in these counties as best it can, on a project-by-project basis.

Besides the funding obstacle that the scarcity of local arts agencies in the Northeast creates, there's a more fundamental consequence. Over the twenty years that local arts agencies have proliferated in North Carolina, organized public involvement in the arts has burgeoned. These agencies seek out, nurture, and celebrate the work of local artists. At the same time they build audiences for the arts in general. In counties without such agencies, the arts surely exist: creativity is everywhere. But communities have less opportunity to come together for the arts and to make new things happen.

This has seemed to be the case generally in the Northeast (with notable exceptions). The Northeast has the state's highest concentration of black people. In fact, the total population is an even mix of black people and white. (County by county that ratio can take wide swings.) There are also sizeable groups of Native Americans. Out of these separate streams and this diversity comes an abundance of musicians, chanters, woodcarvers, needleworkers, painters, dancers, playmakers, and storytellers. Some of them keep their work rooted in local traditions; others draw actively from elsewhere. Without broad-based organizations, the artists have few chances to know one another and few chances to make their work known publicly. Artists and art from outside the region aren't often invited in.

Various people in the Northeast and staff members of the state arts council have worried about the situation for some time. In 1988 the council gave a three-year grant to a regional development organization—Northeastern North Carolina Tomorrow (NNCT)—to pay part of the salary of a cultural circuit rider. The task assigned to this new job was to search in all sixteen counties for people active in the arts and work with them to create ongoing programs for the region. The idea seemed splendid, and a promising new organization—the Northeastern Cultural Alliance—developed from the circuit rider's work. (The alliance is a racially balanced organization made up of two representatives of each of the sixteen counties.) Nevertheless, after two years, NNCT's funds for the project dried up. At that point the council's staff decided to look for something new.

They found it in the collaborative work of Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions.

oadside Theater is in the central Appalachian coal country of southwest Virginia and east Kentucky. (It's part of Appalshop, a pioneering arts and education center started in Whitesburg, Kentucky, in 1969—an outgrowth of the federal War on Poverty.) The company draws its original plays from the region's history—especially oral history—and culture. Its goal is to teach and encourage the communities it visits to discover and celebrate their own stories, their own creativity.

In 1988 the North Dakota Council on the Arts arranged a statewide tour for Roadside. By choice most of the stops were small towns, and the tour was framed as a "rural cultural exchange." Roadside offered its storytelling style of theater as a window on life in the southern mountains, and the North Dakota communities responded with presentations by local artists: cowboy poets, Native American dancers, guitarists, and so on. The tour drew more than 7,000 people. Its success was what led the North Carolina Arts Council to Roadside, and on to Junebug Productions.

Junebug, based in New Orleans, has an equally compelling history. It's the organizational successor to the Free Southern Theater, which began in Mississippi in 1962 as an instrument of the civil rights movement. Junebug's mission is to create theater that encourages people to work for social justice.

The brilliant collaboration between Junebug and Roadside began in 1981, when members of the two companies—John O'Neal and Dudley Cocke, respectively—found themselves worrying about Ku Klux Klan activity in the South. They decided to have the companies perform before each other's usual audiences: Junebug's mostly black, Roadside's mostly white, both mostly poor. They've been working together ever since. A play—"Junebug/Jack"—has emerged from the partnership, and given the partnership its name.

Junebug is an African American folk character invented thirty years ago by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to represent the collective wisdom of black people. Jack is the hero of the Appalachian "Jack tales" (including their most famous ancestor, "Jack and the Beanstalk"). The stories about Junebug and about Jack turn on the power of wit to overcome threatening arbitrary forces. Combined and performed in "Junebug/Jack," the stories can topple ancient social barriers without appearing to give them a nudge.

In a review published by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, Richard Dodds, a theater critic, said the play "demonstrates a sensitivity to black-white differences while also highlighting some of those areas where traditions, legends, experiences, interests, and even music overlap." He went on to comment: "Our roots have become all tangled together, the piece is saying, and there is more to be gained in nurturing these cross-pollinated heritages than in antagonistically yanking them apart."

When the North Carolina Arts Council approached Roadside two years ago about a project for the Northeast, the two theater companies were already thinking about using the joint "Junebug/Jack" company for relatively long residencies in places where issues of race and class are prominent. The goals of the northeastern counties and the council seemed to everyone a good fit with the goals of the Junebug/Jack partnership.

What were these connected goals? One was to use cultural exchange—between segments of communities and between communities and guest artists—to celebrate local cultural life and build bridges of understanding between cultures. Another was to help northeastern communities become more reliant on their own cultural gifts as sources of pleasure and enrichment. And another was to figure out what combination of people and money would be needed to keep public cultural activities going in the region. A [illegible] long Junebug/Jack residency promised to give a boost to all of these goals.

Thus began close to two years of visits and talks that established working relationships among people in the Northeast, members of Junebug/Jack, and staff members of the council. Over the course of many conversations, strategies evolved.

The region was divided into four hubs and separate committees were formed to take charge of them. Each committee took responsibility for finding a coordinator for its hub, for securing performance sites, for seeking out and drawing into the planning an array of community groups and local artists, and for stirring up public interest. The planning process was to be from the bottom up, not the top down. In April of 1992, these efforts would culminate in an extended tour. Junebug/Jack would spend four days or so in each hub, visit schools and adult gathering places, give workshops, rehearse with local artists, and finish every stint with a grand, homegrown, and serendipitous piece of theater.

It was the job of the Junebug/Jack people to stay in touch with the planning process, using the state arts council as its liaison. As the work progressed, they were to give the planners suggestions and feedback. Eventually they were to show northeasterners