

**“We Must Simply Keep Meeting Like This”  
The Formative Years of Alternate ROOTS  
(Regional Organization of Theatres South)**

By John C. Wilson

In the very first ROOTS newsletter The Play Group’s Leanne Davis -- dubbed The Sublime Carrot -- reported on the Sharing Conference held in Sarasota at the end of December 1976, less than four months after the first meeting in Highlander, and declared “we must simply keep meeting like this.” This idea sums up the early years where an increasing number of small community-based southern theaters were finding time and place to meet and get to know one another. These formative years set down solid roots for the organization to grow.

Martha “Marty” Ardren and I are part of the ROOTS lineage, and were present at some significant points in its early history that provided cohesion, making it possible to move forward. For this book we proposed to share stories about the first Sharing Conference in Sarasota, Florida in a Story Corps style. Marty and I had a couple of conversations on Zoom, and quickly discovered that many details from that time aren’t as vivid as we had anticipated. Very few early records survive, so we have used the few remaining documents to confirm details and better recall that time and place. Our scope soon expanded to include coverage of the performance festivals that followed in 1978 and 1980.

In hopes of jostling our memories we also invited several people who were there in 1976 to join our subsequent Zoom conversations. We asked Traci Ardren, Marty’s daughter who was 10 years old back then; Philip Arnoult, founder of Baltimore Theatre Project and an early consultant to ROOTS; and Jon Spelman, the artistic director of Florida Studio Theatre, and host of the first FL gathering, to share their memories. I also reached out to FST company members Terri Mastrobuono and Mady Schutzman.

Prior to my coming to Florida to work on the ROOTS gathering, Marty and I worked together at the Old Creamery Theatre Company (OCTC) in Garrison, Iowa. She was the managing director and I came as a summer intern in 1975. We clicked from the start, and when I learned that she was leaving OCTC for a new theatre job in Florida, I was heartbroken. I returned to OCTC in the summer of 1976 assuming some of her prior job responsibilities. That same summer, after Marty attended the Harvard University Institute of Arts Administration followed by the New Theatre Festival (TNT) in Baltimore, she started her new job as managing director of Florida Studio Theatre (FST). Marty arrived in Sarasota, Florida and learned that FST was hosting and coordinating a Sharing Conference for the emerging Alternate ROOTS.

Marty called to ask me if I'd be interested in coming to Florida for the winter and work with her again. I jumped at the chance. *Have you ever spent a winter in Iowa?* She told me about this new organization of southern theaters and recommended I visit some of them on my drive from Iowa to Florida.

I loaded up my 1964 Ford Galaxy 500 and hit the road. My first stop was Knoxville, Tennessee to meet The Play Group. I found it very helpful to hear the company members' ideas on why this gathering was important, and there was a need for a new network of independent theatres. Heading next to Atlanta, Georgia I vividly remember the splendor of driving on the Blue Ridge Parkway at the peak of autumn color. Around each bend was yet another spectacle of dazzling leaves. At Academy Theatre I was warmly greeted and heard ideas about ROOTS that might seem to contradict those of The Play Group. These differing priorities and needs made me excited to reach Sarasota and get started so I could learn what ROOTS would become. I arrived in late October, and my first meeting of the FST company members was at a Halloween costume party, a bizarre beginning, but somehow it felt like the perfect introduction for I was soon introduced to exciting and different forms of theatre than I'd ever experienced before.

### **A Sharing Experience in Sarasota // 1976**

The Sharing Conference outline had been worked out at a meeting in Dalton, Georgia on October 10, 1976, with Jon Spelman, director of FST, offering to host the conference. At that meeting, participants requested sunshine which was abundantly delivered. Florida Studio Theatre hosted the gathering in Sarasota, Florida from December 27, 1976 to January 1, 1977, which was attended by over 100 southern artists. Travel funds allowed for companies to bring their whole troupe and staff, rather than sending representatives as in prior meetings.

The objectives for this gathering, funded by the Southern Arts Federation (now South Arts), were reported in the very first ROOTS newsletter produced by LeAnn Davis and Beth Stubblefield of The Play Group. They described the objectives as "lofty, idealistic, and in a spirit of trust." It seems to me that does capture how it felt to be together.

According to Davis, "there was money to bring the entire companies, and we were going to be able to see each other's work. Isn't that what this is all about?" It was significant to all be together and to share work. I observed that the companies also wanted to like each other.

Marty said "people wanted to perform for each other, but they also wanted to play together, like going to the beach. They wanted more than just looking at somebody's piece, they wanted to get to know the company members."

A few key people had met prior, but the companies themselves were finally getting a chance to know one another. Traci Ardren offered, "there was a very different feeling before Sarasota than there was before the other [festivals] because of the point of it being

a sharing experience. At first there was the normal sort of competitive thing that actors do with each other, and then they started forming connections and being excited about sharing their work in front of each other.”

But the conference was not all fun and performances. Davis also mentions that beyond the sharing of work and getting to know one another, “the conversations were intense and back and forth, and sometimes really positive, and then more challenging, and then positive again.” Forming an organization that might connect these theaters took serious conversations. Davis continues, “underneath it all was the eternal, basic, and most vital answer -- it is, in one word, survival; the survival of individuals, the survival of companies, and the survival of Alternate ROOTS. We left knowing one thing for certain, we simply must keep meeting like this, and we will.” And we have.

Additional information came from Zack Binkley’s article of December 26, 1976, in *The Bradenton Herald* he writes “Any group in the southeastern area is eligible to join this new organization as long as they are non-profit, community-based, professional alternative theatre.”

“This week’s session provides a chance for the members of these theatre groups to get to know each other and to decide the future of the organization. Some of the topics to be discussed will include plans for a touring network sharing resources such as an attorney and accountant, trading information about grants (this is very important for these non-profit theatres) and information about sponsors.

Binkley quotes Spelman as saying “We think there are some tangible benefits in knowing each other. I think we can learn from each other and share knowledge.”

And he additionally reports on the 7 free performances, “Leading off the public events will be an informal demonstration of juggling at the Siesta Key Beach Pavilion. Area jugglers are invited to bring their paraphernalia to the event to teach and learn from the conference jugglers.”

In communications with FST company member Mady Schutzman, she wrote “you inspired me to go back to my journals which I’ve kept since the early ‘70s. I was not much of a journalist – I didn’t really record my day to day very thoroughly.”

Within Mady’s notes we find that there were two primary performance spaces, The New College Hall on the Ringling Museum property and Kensington Park, the former YMCA that was FST’s home. Also these lovely cryptic notes held reminders of necessary action steps, “December 29th – call to set up grill for picnic, December 30<sup>th</sup> – call to set fire for bonfire.” The bonfire was for the New Years Eve “Potlatch” led by The Play Group, inspired by their recent trip to Poland. There were also notes to check showers, bathrooms, valuables, and lastly, to make master maps of College Hall and Kensington Park for our visitors. “I remember working with Finnean Jones, a FST company member, on the maps to make sure they were clear and user-friendly. As a parting gift from FST, he presented me with a very detailed satirical map of the men’s room at Kensington Park.”

Jon Spelman, founder and artistic director of FST, describes their home in a lower middle-class neighborhood in Sarasota, “It was a huge YMCA, which was sitting empty. We talked the YMCA into renting us the building for a dollar a year. It had a huge full basketball court, a whole set of bathrooms and locker rooms. It had a swimming pool outside, which by that point was only inhabited by a small alligator so could not be used for anything else.

“So basically, the lobby of this space, which we had set up as a theater became the sleeping ground for – I don’t know – I think 65 or 70 people. This is my memory, and of course people were staying elsewhere. Some people also camped out on the property.” Kensington Park was a perfect facility for this kind of gathering. Spelman added “Marty did all kinds of work that I didn’t know about that made the Sharing Conference happen.”

Spelman continues, “we showed each other work, we talked about the work, we horsed around, we stayed up all night. I don’t remember how we ate, but people ate, and there were plenty of bathrooms and showers to use – and they were functioning. Oh my gosh, I remember feeling this is very successful, this is very good. Oh, look what so and so is doing. That’s something we could think about, or he’s trying something and I’ve already tried – maybe I can talk to him and say why I think it didn’t work. Or, you know, all of those various things that were going back and forth.”

The Sharing Conference received national press due to Philip Arnoult’s invitation (perhaps arm twisting) to theater journalist Jennifer Merin. Her article in the January 10, 1977 *Christian Science Monitor* reported that a dozen Southeastern “alternative theater” companies convened.... To exchange information about touring, fund raising, performance training, and other vital areas.”

“The weeklong conference is an unusual event because the groups place such strong and sincere emphasis on sharing. [The groups], with their belief that theater is a celebration of community, feel that sharing is an important part of both their survival and their artistic growth.”

Merin defines alternative theater as “a new movement growing rapidly across the country,” quoting Jon Spelman that “we at FST and other theaters participating here, are concerned that good theater be made available to all segments of the population, even those who cannot afford tickets, or who are intimidated by the formal atmosphere of the traditional theater. Our basic conviction is that theater should be part of the fabric of everyday life. Alternative theater is frequently the alternative to no theater at all.”

Merin reports, “It isn’t economics that distinguishes alternative theater as much as intention. The groups develop much of their own material, which allows them to be more responsive to the needs of their communities in the areas of entertainment, education, and cultural enrichment. Responsiveness is a primary concern.”