Dear ArtSpot family,

We lost one of our artistic fathers last month: John O’Neal, founding member of The Free Southern Theatre and founding artistic director of Junebug Productions, has gone on to dance with the ancestors. Without John’s vision, work, example and mentorship, ArtSpot would be a different company. His way of combining art and activism; his processes (especially the story circle) for creating work; his founding membership in Alternate ROOTS; his relationships with funders, presenters and colleagues outside of New Orleans as well as here on the ground; his inclusion of young white artists like myself in the struggle for racial equity and Black liberation have all deeply informed our work. Even
on an administrative level, Junebug served as our fiscal sponsor for the first several years of our company’s life.

Roscoe Reddix Jr, my co-director with the Positive Outreach Leaders, introduced me to John at the Contemporary Arts Center in ’95. John was already a legend in my mind and I was blown away by how warmly he welcomed the 26-year-old me into his presence. I got to know John more in the late 90’s, when Adella Gautier, then a Junebug ensemble member, invited me to perform in a few of Junebug’s women’s month programs. While we were working at Lawless High School, we heard stories of the controversial flooding of the lower 9th ward following Hurricane Betsy in 1965 that sounded like a perfect example of environmental racism. In 1998, John and Junebug were planning the 1998 Ec(h)o Arts Environmental Justice Festival; I asked if we could create a piece for the festival and John welcomed our involvement on every level. We learned so much through the creation of that piece, Lower 9 Stories, and through conversation with local and national artists and environmental justice activists.

And then, after Katrina, I had the greatest honor of performing with John as “Mama Nola” to his “Papa Legba” in UPROOTED: The Katrina Project, which Alternate ROOTS produced as a way to help the Gulf Coast Artists, whose lives were decimated by the “Federal Flood,” to turn our real life, real time stories of the numerous catastrophes that accompanied that incident into a performance that we used to share what was happening in New Orleans with the rest of the country. John and I, and the other artists involved in the project had artistic, philosophical and racial fights during the process. We spoke frankly at times and we held our tongues at times. We sang together—some of the best harmonies I’ve ever participated in. We facilitated story circles together. We made a performance out of our pain and our break-throughs. Throughout, John was our elder, our playwright, our papa, our baba.

For the last few years, John suffered from vascular dementia and it was hard to witness the huge shift in this man whose path so many of us had tried and still try to follow. His wife Bert and daughter Wendi taught us all the beauty of caretaking and the possibility of keeping our heroes and elders alive and present with us, no matter what limitations their bodies impose. He shared so many lessons with all of us, throughout his life and work. He believed to his core that truthfully sharing our personal stories with one another would lead us all to freedom and a better world.

Thank you, John O’Neal for your bold life and for sharing your legacy so generously with us all. We pray for eternal freedom for your spirit and ask your blessings and guidance from the ancestral realm. Amen. Ashé.

For more information about John and his work, we refer you to three obituaries:

one from longtime friend and collaborator Kalamu ya Salaam, including a video of John speaking;

one from nola.com;

and one from the New York Times.
Holy Wars

Kathy is excited to be directing a staged reading of excerpts from Rob Florence’s play Holy Wars as part of the Tennessee Williams Festival this weekend. Holy Wars tells the story of the nation’s first black Civil War hero, Captain Andre Cailloux, and the only abolitionist priest in the New Orleans archdiocese, Father Claude Pascal Maistre, who founded St. Rose of Lima Parish. The stellar ensemble features actors Martin “Bats” Bradford, Todd D’Amour, Harold Evans, Idella Johnson, and Ray Vrazel with musicians Sunpie Barnes, Helen Gillet, Matt Hampsey, James Singleton, Bill Summers, and Cole Williams. Hosted by the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, the reading will take place on the third floor of the Old U.S. Mint this Saturday, March 30 at 2pm.

THE INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL

MAY 27 - JUNE 12, 2019
DAH THEATRE, BELGRADE, SERBIA

ArtSpot Productions is supported by a Community Arts Grant made possible by the City of New Orleans as administered by the Arts Council New Orleans; by a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, in cooperation with the Louisiana State Arts Council. Funding has also been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts: Art Works, and by Bloomberg Philanthropies. Your contribution is tax-deductible in accordance with IRS regulations.