

DORA LOOKS AT CIVIL RIGHTS

It is so easy to forget events in one's life. That is why, over the years, I have kept countless notes and scraps of paper in countless folders. Unfortunately, the folders were never filed logically, and even though I tried to label them, their order made no sense. There were files containing material from my earliest days, from school, work, family, travel, organizational involvement, labor, politics, every aspect of Jewish life, art, literature, etc.

Looking through my files the other day, I came across a leaflet about a civil rights play for labor audiences, together with the playbill, and a letter from the author of the play. The event started to come back to me, almost as in a dream. It was 1962. I had gotten to know Fred O'Neal, a black actor who had been elected President of Actors' Equity Association. He had been serving on the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee when I was at the JLC and served as staff to the committee. I was also friendly with a woman who was a member of both the JLC Women's Division and Actors' Equity. In conversation with them, an idea developed. Wouldn't it be great if there was a play about civil rights to be performed for labor audiences, with professional actors. It would serve several purposes. It would educate workers with regard to civil rights in an innovative way; it would strengthen the link between the labor movement and the actors' union; it would give union actors work; and it would expose workers to live theater.

It was my job as staff to try to make this happen. I obtained the names of writers who might be interested, and contacted a playwright and actress named Florida Friebus. She was very enthusiastic. It would be a short, half-hour play, with a union angle, and would be easy to stage in a union hall or a large hotel meeting room. I have no idea how this project was funded: Whether the NYC AFL-CIO, or the National AFL-CIO, or Actors' Equity put up the money, but someone must have. (My guess is that Equity had a fund to underwrite work for unemployed actors, similar to the Equity Library Theatre of the '40s.) When the play was to be presented to a labor audience, the union was to pay Actor's Equity \$150, which, even in the '60s, wasn't much.

Some time in 1963, the script was written, reviewed, and approved by members of the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee. The play was cast, and publicity was sent to unions announcing its availability. The leaflet, which I helped Actors' Equity Association prepare, stated: "The Curtain Rises on Something Dramatic for Your Union." It went on to explain that this is the first really different technique to bring home to trade unionists the meaning of today's civil rights struggle. "Living theatre at your union's membership meeting or convention will put life and significance into any occasion where your members get together." The leaflet indicated that the play, with professional actors, and written by an actress, playwright and trade unionist, was endorsed by the NYC AFL-CTO Civil Rights Committee. At the bottom of the leaflet, was a form to be filled out, indicating the date, time and place that the union would like the play performed. It was to be mailed back to Actors' Equity.

On December 14, 1963, the Premiere Performance of “Dora Looks at Civil Rights” took place at the Leadership Conference of the union of which I was now the Education Director, the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board. We had close to 200 members in attendance, meeting at the New York Hilton. The playbill listed the cast, and it was literally a Who’s Who of outstanding actors. I was overwhelmed when they appeared that day, and I was overwhelmed as I read their names on finding the playbill. Playing Dora was Helen Gallagher who starred on Broadway in Hazel Flagg and Pajama Game, and playing Betty was Frances Foster who starred in Raisin in the Sun, succeeding Ruby Dee. The other performers, eight in all, were well known actors appearing on Broadway and television.

The play was a smash hit. Of course, the overwhelming majority of our members were black and Hispanic. They didn’t need much convincing. They knew first hand “the meaning of today’s civil rights struggle.” Many of them had participated in the March on Washington earlier that year. However, our members were delighted that there was such a play. For most of them, this was their first experience with live, professional theatre.

The third item in the newly discovered folder was a hand-written letter to me from Florida Friebus, from Los Angeles, dated August 9, 1964:

“Dear Mr. Schlitt,

Listening to the tragic news from Mississippi this week, I was reminded of a moment in my meeting with the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee last year. A pretty woman representing Jewish groups questioned my use of the name Goodman for my leading couple. She said it was generally considered a Jewish name. I said I was thinking of its meaning! We cut it. No problem.

I was struck by the fact that one of the young men who gave his life, and unspeakable suffering, bore this name, and so do his parents, who also gave everything. They are Jewish, I presume. They also stand for the goodness of man.

It’s just a thought.

Kindest regards,

Florida Friebus”