

## NEW ORLEANS: the original umbrella city

New Orleans is the Performance City, a city which lives and breathes performance as pageant, as expose, as portrait of life, celebrating from birth to death in a dramatic form the passage of life. And New Orleans is the Umbrella City, since the umbrella is used to celebrate each passage from birth to death. You get born with umbrellas, get married with umbrellas, celebrate great events with twirling umbrellas, and die so meaningfully with umbrellas.

The scale of the city, so human thanks to the French engineers and architects who labored so lovingly to make this colony a charming, warm, beguiling place, makes New Orleans at least in the French Quarter an enticement to begin with! Wrought iron and cast iron porches, luscious plantings, inner patios which allow for outdoor living, narrow streets and a feeling for people—all this lends itself to a stage set for life. The larger homes in the Garden District are palatial, magnificent, serious statements about wealth, good living and a gracious setting for drama. The lawns, gardens and surroundings make for the epitome of good living. And the crystal chandeliers—acres of crystal chandeliers—in every home, on every porch, illuminate not only the glorious interiors filled with antique furniture, but also the etched and bevelled glass doors and windows which adorn the facades of almost all the Garden District homes. A virtual light show can be seen only at night—from the windows of the last trolley, the St. Charles line.

It is in this setting that I found New Orleans a drawing card for anyone who is susceptible to the theatre of life. New Orleans appeals to all the senses: taste, for New Orleans combines French, Creole and African dishes into an eating experience unexcelled; hearing, for there is music everywhere from great jazz to street musicians playing folk, country and western, and anything else in-between! The outdoors is part of the everyday life of the city, so that the pageant of living is a pervasive experience at all times.

Even the language—not the accent—but the language is different, stemming from a different tradition. Words and phrases are different, pronunciations are idiosyncratic. Take for instance food: po'boys, beignets, crayfish, jambalaya, eggs sardou, etc. are all peculiar. Then there are krewes (Mardi Gras neighborhoods and groups), dubloons, Zulus, flambeau.

To understand New Orleans is to understand yourself, since it is a microcosm of all the "good" about yourself and your reactions to life. It plays with your dramatic instincts, it deals with the human reactions to surroundings, it invites you to participate. There is that Southern hospitality that enlivens, invites, and entices you to participate, without guilt. And that is the rub, for without guilt you find yourself dancing, crashing parties, looking at costumes as an everyday event. Everyone is part of the pageant, everyone enjoys life, everyone wants *you* to enjoy it too.

Since New Orleans has performance as part of the fibre and fabric of its society, it was not unusual to find artists who came to New Orleans in late January using performance as a medium to join women together for ERA, to use umbrellas as focus for attention in a noon-time parade for ERA, to use umbrellas to send out Professor Longhair on his way to his burial (Professor Longhair, a fixture in New Orleans who was King of the Mardi Gras last year and influenced rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and the musical core of New Orleans died the end of January), nor is it unusual to see umbrellas lifted in celebration of a wedding. Just as the Mississippi winds its way through the city of New Orleans, so does New Orleans wind its way through your own experience, twisting and turning, bending with natural contours, making new inroads in your life.

So New Orleans is pageant and performance, with Mardi Gras, the Jazz Festival, mini-celebrations like the Artists' Mardi Gras parade with the Krewe of Clones on Saturday night, 2 February, renovations and restorations of homes and buildings or new edifices that remind one of a stage set such as the Piazza d'Italia created by architect Charles Moore. Thus to be the seat of three conventions, ARLIS, CAA and WCA, allowed for more pageantry, more performance, and more genuine appreciation of a distracting, diverting, delicious city called New Orleans.

It was, therefore, not ironic to meet the Ku Klux Klan in Covington, Louisiana, standing on the middle line of a two-lane "interstate" stopping traffic in their white hoods, asking for donations with their straw baskets, and handing out KKK newspapers. The end of the "total performance" of the Louisiana experience—another form of performance to fill out the pageant of life.

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