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Letter from Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Attorney to Mr. Wade H. Sides, Jr.

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November 24, 1962

Mr. Wade H. Sides, Jr.

President

Front Street Theatre

Sterick Building

Memphis, Tennessee

Dear Sir:

We wish to protest strongly your recent step backward to racial discrimination in your Theatre's admission policy. We each receive prior to the current season, unsolicited invitations through the mail to purchase season coupons and take membership in the Front Street Theatre. We each did so. Until recently, our families have enjoyed the programs presented by the Theatre and felt that the other patrons also shared the view that "the play is the thing".

Those of us who felt that it is unfair to call Memphis a vast cultural desert were encouraged by your step and felt that among the better citizens of Memphis, at least it was possible to develop [sic] an oasis in this desert, dedicated to up-lifting the human spirit through cultural activities and recognizing the basic value of our society as being the increasing enhancement of human dignity.

Your democratic policy was apparently rooted in sand. On Wednesday, November 14, 1962, we and our wives were refused admission to your production of 'GYPSY". We were told by your personnel at the box office that there had been a change in policy and that Negroes were now not welcome in the Theatre. This in spite of the fact that we had become members of the Theatre and held season coupons. The following evening, your President, Mr. Wade H. Sides, Jr., and one of the members of the Board of Governors, Attorney Hunter Lane, Jr., came to this office for a conference on the matter. As Mr. Sides presented the Theatre's position, it appears to be based on the fact that he and some others of the management have received protests about the admission of Negroes, and, fearful that this protest might produce a smaller box office, decided that the Theatre's future could best be secured by returning to a policy of segregation and discrimination. We feel that his argument over the possible impact on the box office of an open admission policy can at best be regarded as pure speculation. We believe this because "GYPSY", which is apparently enjoying a successful run from the box office view point, was promoted, as far as the Theatre-going-public was concerned, on an open admission basis. That is none of the people who have been a part of the audience would be limited to white patrons only. On the other hand, Mr. Sides readily admitted that the Theatre's economic troubles pre-dated the adoption of an open admission policy. We are both frank to state the implication raised by your back sliding does not help dispel the accusation that Memphis is indeed a vast cultural waste land. We believe that this step also raises a serious question as to where the real responsibility for moral decay which blemishes the American dream should rest. All too often, we hear that the better elements in our communities abhor

prejudice and discrimination and are eager to do better, but are unable to move too rapidly for fear of leaving the unwashed

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masses too far behind. We submit that the example of the Front Street Theatre's inability to win enough support from the "better element" of the community without a policy reflecting prejudice and discrimination, makes a poor buttress for the general attempt to blame the unwashed masses for the scars on the face of democracy. This is especially true in view of the fact that the unwashed masses of Memphis are now supporting with undiminished enthusiasm weekly wrestling matches and periodic jazz shows, even though both these types of entertainment are presented to the public on open audience basis.

We feel that you have reflected upon yourselves great shame for the simple fact that your word has been broken. You have breached a contract which was not urged upon you, but which rather you urged upon us, and breached it for reasons which we both regard as contemptible.

Since this incident, we have been informed that the matter of a change in policy was never brought before you as a full board of the Front Street Theatre. We are hopeful if the matter is brought before you as a full board our present impression of the board's standards may be changed, for we are hopeful that the decision to go back to a policy of discrimination does not reflect the thinking of the majority of the board. We are hopeful that when a majority of the board is given an opportunity to consider the implications of this new policy, they will feel that somethings in the American culture are more important than box office, and among these things our cultural emphasis on human dignity as a pre-eminent factor in the American way of life comes first.

Sincerely yours,

R.B. Sugarmon, Jr., Attorney

A.W. Willis, Jr., Attorney

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cc: Members of the Board of Governors