Chapter II

Crucible and Community:
The Vision of Rose McClendon

“Her voice was ever soft, Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman”

(King Lear Act V, scene. iii, 246–247).

Rose McClendon, like Cordelia, was one of the quiet but determined women of her time. Critics extolled her “sweetness,” “majesty,” and “queenly” dignity. Her frail, small body and demeanor belied her strong commitment to her vision. An actor and visionary, Rose McClendon created a Negro People’s Theatre that accurately reflects varied black experiences, with a diverse group of actors playing a wide range of roles.

Lisa M. Anderson, in her groundbreaking work, Mammies No More, examines three stereotypes of black women: the Mammy, the Tragic Mulatto, and the Jezebel. McClendon’s career consisted, almost exclusively, of these three stereotypes. Through dogged persistence, courage, and naturally endowed talent, with her Negro People’s Theatre, she helped to change the image of African Americans on the American stage.

In August 1936, Opportunity wrote:

It was Rose McClendon’s great ambition to establish a Negro theatre—a theatre that would “develop not an isolated Robeson, an occasional Bledsoe or Gilpin, but a long line of first-rate actors” (228).

While her dream was never fully realized, African American participation in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Theatre of 1935–39
No Surrender! No Retreat!

came, in great measure, because of her influence. Many black Federal Theatre actors played heroes for four brief years. With $46 million of government money spread out across America, 13,000 people crossed the boards of the Federal Theatre Project, 851 of them black. McClendon died a year after the Federal Theatre opened, but her influence on the inclusion of black actors cannot be denied.

In spite of Rose McClendon paving the way for others, her own career was filled with disappointment in the limited kinds of roles she obtained and in the way she was treated. Dick Campbell, a close friend of McClendon's, and her professional partner in her vision, recalled in a 20 May 1988 interview:

It was the dream of Rose McClendon to have a theatre group that could do any kind of plays—plays that were actually something that expressed black life as it existed. . . . I recall about 1930 or 1931, we used to go by Dr. McClendon's [Rose McClendon's husband] apartment and a group of us would sit and she would read things from the Medea . . . and we would applaud just like we were in the theatre.

With the exception of Langston Hughes's Mulatto, in which McClendon starred on Broadway in 1935, most of the other work in which she performed was written by white playwrights: Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, Paul Green, and Laurence Stallings.

McClendon's dream of a Negro People's Theatre, however, was not an artistic one, alone. Theatre is an art and a business. Broadway invests millions, and the simplest venues cost. Two years before the Great Crash of 1929, Eva LeGallienne solicited $1, each, from thousands of potential subscribers for the Civic Repertory Theatre.

While many Americans stood in soup and bread lines during the Great Depression, Rose McClendon wrote Dick Campbell on 28 June 1935 about her efforts:

Dear Dick: You can see by this leaflet that we are working like mad. I have contacted all of the active theatre groups and find them eager to work for and with us, so we must carry on. Our greatest concern is now to raise $150.00 . . . by next Friday to pay for the house before we go in it. I don't know where it's coming from, but I do know we will have it. That is just how much faith I have in what we are doing. Will write after the 30th to tell you the results. Keep your fingers crossed until then. Yours up to my ears in work. P.S. Best to the wife. Rose.

McClendon never gave up.

Born on 27 August 1884, in Greenville, North Carolina, to Sandy and Tena (Jenkins) Scott, Rosalie Virginia Scott McClendon was a woman of