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# Longleaf

S T Y L E

## APPALACHIA

*her people...her culture....  
and her Queen Dolly Parton*

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# APPALACHIA

By Dudley Cocke

## ...on the *Move*

### *Hello Southern Cousins:*

I'm writing to you from the coalfields of Appalachia. Out the window I see Route 23, "Country Music Highway," named for the thousands of pickers, singers, and songwriters from these hills and hollows who have traveled out in every direction. In the words of the great Appalachian songwriter Jean Ritchie,

*For I was born and raised  
At the mouth of Hazard Holler  
Coal cars rolled and rumbled past my door  
Now they stand in a rusty row all empty  
And the L&N don't stop here anymore.*

There's a lot of history – industrial and personal – connecting these coalfields with the ironworks, miners, and steel manufacturing plants of Birmingham and Bessemer.

As a designated region, Appalachia was invented in 1965 by the federal government as a way to attack poverty along the Appalachian Mountain spine snaking through 13 states, from New York to Mississippi. That's a lot of territory – 420 counties. How much cultural similarity exists in that space is an open question, and the answer probably doesn't matter much, except to marketers. Despite Wal-Marts, Burger Kings, and their pitchmen's mass communication apparatus, most people live local lives.

I work at an outfit called Appalshop (a contraction of Appalachian Workshop) dedicated to using all forms of artistic expression and media to help local life become more aware of itself – of its singularity, as well as of its similarities with life in other places.

To do this work, Appalshop has a theater company, a radio station, a film and video production division, a record label, an archive, several training programs, and a dynamic web-based new media project. Appalshop reports in-depth on the Appalachian experience – from the Old Regular Baptist Church to strip mining, from Mud Creek Clinic to A.T. Massey Coal Company, from the arrival of Mexican



As "Ghost" in *Betsy*, a play collaboration between Roadside Theater, Whitesburg, Kentucky and Pregones in the Bronx. Photo by Erika Rojas.

immigrants to the ways of traditional Appalachian banjo players. The organization's work explores the hopes, fears, and issues of local people and connects them with the realities of other people in other places – often in distant places like Zuni, New Mexico, Nigeria's Rivers State, and Indonesia. Over four decades, Appalshop has discovered the art that travels best is art with deep roots, and Appalshop's plays, films, radio productions, literary publications, and music have traveled around the world, always looking for local connections upon which to build a cultural exchange.

I direct Roadside Theater, the drama wing of Appalshop. Roadside is a traveling company of writers, singers, pickers, and storytellers. We've toured Alabama – from Slap Out to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival– and 42 states in between. Roadside's ongoing 15-year collaboration with theater artists and musicians in New York's South Bronx is a good example of how we go about melding our Appalachian cultural roots with those in the places we visit.

The Bronx story began twenty years ago when Roadside heard about a Puerto Rican theater, Pregones, which is dedicated to making plays from its island history and heritage. About the same time, we noticed that the federal government's annual ranking of the economically poorest communities usually had our home in eastern Kentucky paired with the Bronx at the bottom of the heap. With this in mind, we decided to pay a visit to those we reckoned must be our city cousins.

Hosted by Pregones, we performed traditional Appalachian music and stories for Puerto Rican and Dominican audiences and invited the Bronx artists we met to come perform for mountain audiences. By the second year of the music and story exchange, which included cooking and drinking together, we discovered similarities and, equally interesting, dissimilarities in our traditions. To understand more, we began sharing the stage, playing off each other, mixing Spanish and English. Audiences in New York and Appalachia liked what they saw and heard. Buoyed by their enthusiasm, we decided to create some full-scale plays together.

Both theater companies appreciated that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and about others, those we can comprehend and imagine, carry our identity and our culture, defining what we believe to be possible in our individual and collective lives. With this big thought in mind, we agreed the plays we would co-create should strengthen our respective traditions and, at the same time, tell a new American story.

That's what we did in our recent co-production, *Betsy*, starring a Bronx-born and bred-proud Puerto Rican jazz singer, Betsy Garcia, who inherits her parents' Latin music club only to suddenly discover she has prominent Southern, Scotch-Irish roots. Two time-traveling, shape-shifting ghosts (with 18 original - and several traditional - songs) come to Betsy's rescue, taking her on a journey that begins in 1794 when her great, great, great, great grandmother Elizabeth, an Irish milking maid, is seduced by a sailor bound for America. Arriving in the Promised Land,

Elizabeth and her soon-to-be born daughter are sold as indentured servants to pay for their passage.

As Betsy Garcia struggles mightily to reconcile her two identities, we come to recognize – as recent genome sequencing and DNA testing have confirmed – in some way or another we are all Betsy. This new-found American complexity is surely cause for celebration, producing new joy as we rise together to sing that grand southern hymn written down by Appalachia's own A.P. Carter,

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*Will the circle be unbroken*

*By and by, Lord, by and by.*

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*Dudley Cocke is Artistic Director of Roadside Theater.*



Yaritza Pizzaro as Betsy. Photo by Erika Rojas.