

# Roadside Theater's *Mountain Tales & Music*

## A Study Guide for Teachers and Students

### **ROADSIDE THEATER BACKGROUND**

Roadside Theater's home is in the central Appalachian coalfields of southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky. All of Roadside's actor/storytellers and musicians were born in the region. The company has spent 26 years developing original plays drawn from the mountain history and culture of its home. Roadside tours to all parts of the United States, has been in residence a number of times off-Broadway, has performed at Lincoln Center's Out-of-Doors Festival in New York City and at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., and has had the privilege to represent the United States at international theater festivals in the Czech Republic, Sweden, Denmark, and the British Isles. Committed to community-based work, the company often conducts educational residencies and cultural exchange programs that celebrate a host community's local life and culture.

Roadside Theater is one part of Appalshop, the nonprofit arts and education center that also includes the Appalshop Center, Appalshop Film & Video, Appalachian Media Institute, Community Media Initiative, and WMMT-FM Community Radio.

### **MOUNTAIN TALES & MUSIC BACKGROUND**

The tales Roadside uses were collected from family members and from oral histories collected in Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky. Some of the tales are derivatives of European fairy tales and some are as old as Homer's *Odyssey*. Similar stories are found in cultures all over the world.

Jack Tales are among the tales more readily identified as traditional Appalachian stories. In the Jack Tales, the hero, who is always called Jack, is an "everyman" character. Usually he is a boy of non-defined age, living with his widowed mother in a poverty stricken state. Many of the stories focus on Jack as he sets out on a journey to seek his fortune. The stories vary according to difficulties and powerful forces he encounters along the way. Jack always triumphs, sometimes through intellect, more often than not through sheer will and blind luck. There are hundreds of Jack Tales. An interesting variation are the Muttsmeg Tales, a female version of Jack. Although none stray very far from the formula, they remain entertaining and unique.

Other Tales feature a wide variety of characters and situations. They are sometimes based loosely on real people and real circumstances, which have been told and re-told until they have reached a special category of 'creative history'. Like the Jack Tales, all are representative of the constant struggle of people to better their lives.

Roadside enhances the mountain tales by integrating traditional fiddle and banjo tunes. Songs tell stories in a different way.

Although storytelling is not an integral part of daily life for most people, it is still part of the Appalachian cultural makeup. Stories have survived thousands of years because they inspire us to examine our ability to love and hate and to recognize good and evil. Their final value lies in their ability to entertain and instruct, even in today's modern world.

## **PROGRAM OBJECTIVES**

1. To acquaint students with Appalachian culture through the storytelling and music indigenous to the Central Appalachian Mountains.
2. To acquaint students with the storytelling/acting method Roadside Theater has developed to incorporate storytelling into a dramatic form for the stage.
3. To help students examine their own background and cultures and come up with their own stories, and to show how this can be a source for dramatic material.

## **STORYTELLING WORKSHOP OUTLINE**

Subjects outlined in this description will be covered on the level of understanding of the age group being worked with.

Material covered:

1. Brief history of storytelling in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.
2. Storytelling as an art form.
3. Storytelling as a form of communication.
4. The oral tradition in songs and stories.
5. Where to find stories for re-telling.
6. A storytelling demonstration by Roadside Theater
  - a. Discussion of Roadside's form of storytelling
  - b. Student response

Suggested points to discuss with students before the Roadside visit

1. The origin of Appalachian Mountain tales
2. Styles of music and how the different styles are used
3. Styles of theater
4. Superstitions, jokes, and riddles
5. Appalachian/Regional dialect
6. Cultural practices vs. popular trends
7. Oral history and the need to document oral histories

After the play, it is good to discuss these same points again to see how the original answers can be clarified and elaborated upon.

## **SUGGESTED POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES**

- Interview your oldest relative (or friend or neighbor) and ask them to tell you their favorite childhood memories. You might want to start out by telling something that happened to you. For example, "In school today, we had a picnic lunch and played softball afterwards. What kind of things did you do for fun at school?"
- Tell a story about your childhood (something you actually did) and also write a journal entry about it.
- Have a group of students who have been together since kindergarten get together and share their most memorable common experience.
- Ask an adult to give you three riddles they remember from their childhood. See if they are ones you are familiar with today. Make a class collection of their riddles (perhaps a booklet or a bulletin board.)

## RELATED VOCABULARY WORDS

oral tradition	folklore	myth	fairy tale
Jack tales	isolation	fables	animal tales
folklore	culture	legends	oral history
stereotype	dialect	folk hero	

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For more on Appalachian storytelling, take advantage of some of the following resources:

### Video

*Three Mountain Tales* (includes *Fat or Lean*, *The Big Toe*, and *The Little Fish Story*) with  
Roadside Theater, Appalshop Film & Video

*Fixin' to Tell About Jack* with Ray Hicks, Appalshop Film & Video

### Audio

*Mountain Tales* (a spoken word cassette recording of *Three Mountain Tales*) Roadside Theater

### Books

by Richard Chase

*Grandfather Tales*, Houghton Mifflin

*Jack Tales*, Houghton Mifflin

by Roadside Theater

*Journeys Home: Revealing an Appalachia/Zuni Collaboration*, University of New Mexico Press

by Leonard Roberts

*Sang Branch Settlers*, University of Texas Press

*Old Greasybeard: Tales from the Cumberland Gap*, Gale Group

*South from Hell-Fer-Sartin: Kentucky Mountain Folk Tales*, University Press of KY

*Up Cutshin and Down Greasy*, University Press of KY

The *Foxfire* collection, Doubleday & Co.

### Websites

Roadside Theater, [www.appalshop.org/rst](http://www.appalshop.org/rst)

Storytelling Foundation International, [www.storytellingcenter.net](http://www.storytellingcenter.net)