



Lessons Learned: Case Studies

Mountaineers, Farmers, and Cowfolk Create Two Plays About Place

by Donna Porterfield and Dudley Cocke

ABSTRACT: The study examines the collaboration between two rural theaters -- one professional and the other volunteer -- as each created a new American play from its community's life. Embedded in the artistic collaboration is a cultural exchange between the two theaters' communities.

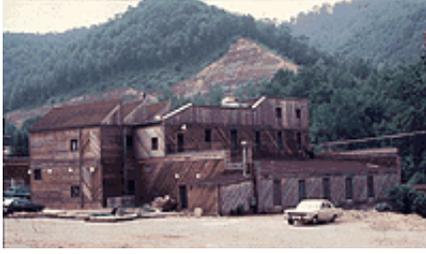
1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AND PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES.

THE PROJECT

Three organizations -- Roadside Theater, a professional, nonprofit theater from Whitesburg, Kentucky; For Arts (pseudonym), a volunteer, nonprofit performing arts presenting organization located in a rural western town; and the Artist and Community Connection (ACC), a professional, nonprofit producing organization based in Austin, Texas -- formed a consortium to develop and test a model for the creation of rural drama that is original, of high artistic quality, honors and perpetuates local traditions, and engages community concerns. The project's duration was two years, and the cost was \$178,000. Project funding was a roughly equal mix of private and public money. Public support came from federal, state, and local agencies. Private support came from regional and national foundations. ACC served as project coordinator and producer. The project expanded on the relationship established by the three partners in a previous three-year project in which Roadside Theater, along with other touring performing artists, performed and conducted workshops in For Arts' community. ACC served as coordinator for the initial project.

For Arts and Roadside Theater each wrote and produced an original play. For Arts collaborated with their local, volunteer community theater. This was the second new play on which they had collaborated. Two women from the local theater used community oral histories to write the play. Original music was added. A Roadside associate artist served as For Arts' dramaturg. Roadside wrote and produced its play in collaboration with the Mullins Family Singers from Dickenson County, Virginia. For over 100 years, the Mullins family has provided a strong musical voice in the mountains by passing along a tradition of family harmony gospel singing begun by Enoch Mullins who taught shape note singing in the 1800's. Today the Family sings at revivals, funerals, memorial meetings, and festivals. They are members of the Free Will Baptist Church, a fundamentalist congregation that originated in the mountains in the nineteenth

century. Although *Roadside* and the Family had previous experience performing together, this was their first collaboration on a new work.



Appalshop



Eastern Slope

A cultural exchange was conducted between the artists and audiences of the two rural communities. For Arts' 28 artists and crew traveled to eastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia to perform their play, sing, conduct workshops, and experience Appalachian community life. A month later *Roadside*'s eight artists returned the favor. A paid, professional folklorist with expertise in both Appalachian and Western rural traditions directed research, conducted interviews with artists, and helped For Arts collect stories for their play. Initial decisions about the overall goals and budgeting for the project were made in face-to-face meetings with representatives of each of the three partners at a round table. The administrative and artistic details of the collaboration were managed by ACC, which also maintained and communicated an overview of the project's progress and issues. Each theatrical company managed its own creative process, sometimes learning from and being inspired by what the other was doing. The conduit for this learning and inspiration was the ACC producer, the folklorist, and exchange visits by several of the For Arts and *Roadside* artists during the plays' development.

ROADSIDE THEATER, CENTRAL APPALACHIA

Since 1975, *Roadside Theater* has been writing, staging, and touring original plays drawn from the history and culture of its home in the rural coal fields of mountainous, central Appalachia where its artists were born and reared. The company has toured extensively, including in 43 states and abroad. Its work has been presented at diverse venues, including Lincoln Center, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, off-Broadway, in tents, churches, and community centers up the hollows and in the towns of Appalachia, and at international theater festivals. All of the theater's plays reflect their place of origin.

Appalachia has been called a rich land with poor people, and, one might add, a rich culture. It is the cradle of bluegrass and country music, perpetuates an authentic tradition of storytelling that reaches back to the British Isles, and has spawned indigenous churches, many with dramatic liturgies.

Economically, the region ranks with the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the Mississippi Delta at the bottom of the nation in per capita income. A recent study by the University of Kentucky reported that unemployment ranges from 15 to 65 percent in the region's towns and counties, that one-third of the region's

population lives below the federal poverty line, and that 53 percent of the region's children are classified as economically deprived. In eastern Kentucky, two out of every five students who reach the ninth grade drop out before finishing high school, five out of nine adults have no diploma, and the adult illiteracy rate is almost 50%. Ninety-nine percent of the population is classified as white.

Roadside Theater is a part of the Appalshop, the multi-disciplinary rural arts and education center which for the past 30 years has been producing and distributing films, videos, radio, audio recordings, and theater that celebrate the culture and voice the concerns of Appalachian people.

FOR ARTS, RURAL WESTERN STATE

For Arts, located in a small town on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, is a performing arts presenting organization. It was established in 1980 to promote cultural development in its hometown, population 1,700, and in its county of 6,271 people. For Arts began by presenting single performances, but today its annual program includes seven events (taking place in a school auditorium, a local bar, a library, and the city park), and an arts program in the public schools.

Collaborating with a national coalition of artists, which included Roadside Theater, For Arts sponsored a three-year (1992-1995) story collection project conceived as part of an economic development initiative to retain the area's young people. More than a hundred stories and songs were archived as a result of the multi-generational story collection project. For Arts also joined efforts with their local nonprofit community theater and the same Roadside associate artist who would subsequently serve as dramaturg on their second production. Using the story archive as primary source, the three partners created and produced the first play about For Arts' Community.. The play was about a fictitious local family that gathers to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of its matriarch and patriarch. At the celebration, family members tell stories and sing songs about where they live and who they are. At the end of the play, the audience is invited to a reception at which they eat wedding anniversary cake and exchange stories with the fictitious family. The production had an 18-member intergenerational cast. After premiering locally, by popular demand the play toured to surrounding rural counties. It was a departure from the community theater's previous productions, which had relied on the standard published fare of New York mail-order offerings. The cast was heartened by the effect the performances had on audiences: the Play made cast and community members proud of their place and provided insight into their worries about the future.

For Arts is located in a predominately middle-class, white, ranching and dryland farming community that values self-sufficiency and independence. Its population also includes Metis, of mixed Native American and European heritage, and the Hutterites, a religious group of German descent who farm and live communally. Local artistic traditions include storytelling, western dance (waltz, two-step, etc.), cowboy music and poetry, choral singing, European classical music, playmaking, and Metis fiddle and guitar music. Major changes are disrupting For Arts' traditional community, as multi-national companies buy out family-owned

ranches and farms, and real estate developers market vacation property to wealthy, out-of-state clients attracted to the region's natural beauty. Many of the county's young adults move to the city as it becomes increasingly difficult to survive economically. For Arts sees its original plays as tools to help community members rediscover and use the traditions that held them together in the past to solve current problems.

THE ARTIST AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION (ACC)

ACC's mission is to create a meaningful connection and exchange between artists and the communities they visit. ACC, in its role as cultural organizer, helps initiate and coordinate partnerships with performing artists, presenters, and various community organizations whose work and goals include community affirmation, cultural self-determination, respect for cultural diversity, and equitable distribution of cultural resources. The connection is made through a specific planning process that begins with all partners deciding together the project's mission and the residency plan, including budget and job responsibilities. In the past few years, ACC has organized nine such residencies in various parts of the U.S.

2. HOW DID THE EXCHANGE AND COLLABORATION MEASURE UP TO THE VALUES ARTICULATED AT THE OUTSET OF THE PROJECT?

At the outset, the project articulated these aspirations:

1. The plays will be given their voice by the community from which they arise. The artists will be part of the culture from which the work is drawn. The people who are the subjects of the work will be part of its development from inception through presentation. Their stories and histories will inform the work; their feedback during the creation process will shape it. The audience will not be consumers of, but participants in the performance.
2. The plays will witness a commitment to place. They will be grounded in the local and specific, which, when rendered faithfully and creatively, can affect people anywhere.
3. The traditional and indigenous are integral to rural life and valued for their ability to help us maintain continuity with the past, respond to the present, and prepare for the future. Thus, the relationship to the traditional and indigenous will be dynamic, not fixed.
4. The project will strive to be inclusive in its producing practices. Presentation of the work will be made in partnership with community organizations. Performances will be held in meeting places where the entire community feels welcome. Tickets will be affordable.
5. The collaboration and exchange will recognize that management structures and business practices are value-laden, affecting the mission, goals, and creative process. Through its structures and practices, the project

will endeavor to support broad participation, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.

6. The project will be consciously linked to the struggles for cultural, social, economic, and political equity for all people in each community. Although the project offers hope and joy, it also recognizes that advocating equity often meets resistance, and that such resistance, when articulated, is an opportunity for positive change.

For Arts' and Roadside Theater's playmaking processes were designed to tap the cultural roots of their respective locales. Roadside set about creating a musical play with traditional Appalachian folk artists. To lay the foundation for the creation, three years prior to collaborating on the new script Roadside's artists began singing with the Mullins Family at church services, funerals, and picnics, and performing with them in Roadside's annual Christmas production. A year before the new play project and exchange, Roadside cast the Family in one of its popular musical plays to test their interest and potential as stage performers. Interest and talent being abundant, the theater offered them the opportunity to collaborate on a new play as part of a cultural exchange with western artists. The Family welcomed the challenge.



Members of Roadside Theater and the Mullins family in *New Ground Revival*

The resulting 90-minute musical play explores the conflict between mountain traditions, which see humankind's relationship to the land as sacred, and the economic pressures that impel us to destroy our place. The production includes fifteen new and seven traditional songs, some sung a cappella, others accompanied by combinations of guitar, banjo, fiddle, and accordion. All arrangements employ traditional mountain harmonies -- the Mullins Family specialty. The script was developed using Roadside's proven story circle process. Over a period of six months, the play's author/composer

brought themes and related stories and songs to the circle of Mullins Family Singers and Roadside Theater ensemble members. In turn, each person in the circle would tell a story or sing a song prompted by the author's offering. The songs and stories were audiotaped. The author then used the material generated in the circles to write the play's book and music. As the writing advanced, the circle served as a sounding board for the play's evolving form and content. By the final draft, the material was familiar to all of the artists, including the director and designer. Those responsible for the management of the play were also a part of the story circles and were now ready to assume their roles, including designing the marketing materials and raising touring subsidies. During the play's early production stages, community audience members provided feedback about what was and was not working.

For Arts used a somewhat different play development process. Two local women, one a school teacher and the other a musician and music teacher, wrote

the two-hour play based on stories culled from the community's archive and from additional tales they collected. Both women had participated in the initial 1992-95 story collection project and had volunteered to write For Arts' first original play. The same paid, professional theater director who directed For Arts' first play served as dramaturg for this second script. This time, the play was directed by the writers, who had assisted the professional director on the first production.

 [*I'll Fly Away*](#) (Roadside Theater and the Mullins Family)

The vehicle for the new play was the annual Fourth of July celebration, the occasion for family reunions, parades, rodeos, and plenty of drinking. In the play, a fictitious extended family swaps tales, argues politics, plays tricks, and sings songs. Most of the music is sung by the entire cast. These choral compositions rely on simple melodies and strong harmonies, and are accompanied by guitars. The playwrights presented the final draft of the script to the cast, who reworked their parts with the writers' help. The cast also contributed new material, including additional music. As in Roadside's process, the result of this collaborative approach was cast ownership of the material. In both plays, this ownership made a telling difference in the performances. A For Arts cast member said of the experience, "Some of the stories used in the play were ones that I'd heard since I was a little kid. When I was given my role, Ben, I was told I could develop the personality of the character. Ben is a mixture of several people that I grew up with around here, including my great granddad. Once we started rehearsal, a story in the script would remind me of other stories I'd heard, so I'd throw them in. Sometimes they'd stay in the play." As in Kentucky, community members served as audience sounding boards during rehearsals of the play.



By the time For Arts and Roadside traveled to each others' communities to perform, curiosity about the new plays was widespread. Included in the exchange were 24 workshops and events co-sponsored by an array of community organizations, including seven different church denominations, a home extension club, an historical society, senior citizen centers, commercial

businesses, a public library, public schools, and a country store. The exchange activities, which included pot luck suppers, quilting bees, logging demonstrations, cattle brandings, square dances, community singings, church gospel sings, group discussions, and individual conversations, established a personal relationship between visitors and host community and between audience and performer.

Each play was performed twice, back-to-back, in each community for a total of eight performances. Venues included a professional theater space, a high school auditorium, and a community pavilion. Tickets cost \$3 for students and senior citizens and \$5 for adults. The price of admission to the project's grand finale was a covered dish for the supper that followed the performances. Total project play attendance was 1,250. All performances in both host communities were sold out and many audience members stood. In one venue, people (including the mayor, who arrived late) had to be turned away. Total project exchange participation

was 2,713. At both sites, local press coverage was extensive, with articles appearing both in the news and arts sections. Audience members were 95% rural, 27% older citizens, and 18% students/children.

All performances received standing ovations. Audience members stayed around for more than an hour after each performance to swap tales with the performers and visit with one another. A For Arts cast member said of the experience, "The opportunity to share with someone else was a welcomed experience for me. This project has brought us a little closer or given us a better-defined identity. Above all, I was most excited about the way we were received in Kentucky. The audiences were not only plentiful, but so accepting and responsive to us. I have even referred to this project as a religious experience because it has touched me so deeply and been so life altering."

3. WHAT TENSIONS DID THE COLLABORATION RAISE?

The different organizational structures and management needs of a volunteer and a professional organization and the distance between two groups located on opposite sides of the country caused tensions in the project from its inception. Roadside Theater, the fiscal agent for the project, operates with a \$500,000 annual budget and a company of full-time artists, producers and administrators. Roadside is one part of Appalshop, which employs 37 people and has an annual budget of \$2.4 million. For Arts and its local community theater are both volunteer organizations with small budgets and no paid staff.

Roadside's professional status and paid staff were an advantage to the project because the company was able to raise money that For Arts could not raise. However, in financial negotiations it was easy for Roadside to be seen by For Arts as holding too many of the cards. For example, For Arts has no overhead, and therefore found it difficult to accept Roadside's fixed overhead costs. For Arts viewed such expenses as lost to the real work; Roadside saw the expenditures as project investments in potential funding and financial management. ACC's director, For Arts' director, and Roadside's managing director reached a financial agreement that included Roadside's overhead costs. Although the project moved forward under this agreement, it was not entirely satisfactory to some of For Arts' board members, and the issue remained a burr under the project's saddle.

By necessity, For Arts used the lion's share of its allocation of the money to pay travel expenses (including plane fares, per diems, and car rentals) for its 28-member cast and crew to come to Kentucky for the exchange, and did not pay artists' salaries or hire administrative staff. The scope of the project put extra administrative and financial responsibility on For Arts' volunteers, who already had full-time jobs. Because Roadside and ACC used grant money to pay themselves to work on the project, For Arts occasionally abdicated, intentionally or by default, some of their administrative responsibility. This relieved their volunteers' hectic schedules, but sometimes strained working relationships. The distance between the two groups exacerbated the problem. Whenever representatives of the three partners were physically together, the tensions

dissipated.



A For Arts residency activity

There were differences in the way For Arts and Roadside Theater viewed ACC's role in the project. For Arts perceived ACC's role as a minor one -- acting as a kind of agent, brokering dates and budgets. This was their experience, as an arts presenter, with agents with whom they annually negotiated contracts for a season of touring performances. Some For Arts board members did not want to pay ACC for work that went beyond this agent routine. Roadside, on the other hand, viewed ACC as a full partner with a key role -- project producer and administrator. Roadside's ten-year experience of conducting multi-year community residencies confirmed

the need for such a third-partner. As the project progressed, For Arts' director collaborated with ACC, and his board agreed to allocate grant money to pay for ACC's work; but it was not until the end of the project that some of For Arts' members recognized the importance of ACC's producing and administrative function. Their coming to this understanding gradually made ACC's job harder.

Each theater experienced some tension during the development of its play. For Arts decided to address a number of local issues, including corporate land development, reintroduction of the grizzly bear into the area, the local library closing, and community resentment toward the Hutterites, a religious group who farm and live communally and who don't vote, or serve in the military, or pay taxes. The project's folklorist was concerned that the For Arts script did not reflect the differences of opinion held in the community about each of these issues. The solution was having the cast argue the issues from the points of view of their characters during rehearsals. These arguments were then refined by the playwrights and added to the script. An editorial in For Arts' local newspaper said of the play, "It sent a message to the community; our strength lies in our diversity. Like the fictitious family, our community can accommodate many individuals with different beliefs and opinions who are united by their sense of community and their desire to live here."

In the staging of Roadside's play, tension arose when the Mullins Family became worried that their appearance in the play would not be accepted by their local religious community and its leaders. For the first time in public, they were singing secular music, and the play had a square dance number in it -- two things to which some local religious sects, and some members of their church, object. Another concern for the Family members was stagecraft. For example, they were not accustomed to paying much attention to where they stood when singing. When asked by the folklorist about the play's director, a family member replied, "To begin with, we thought he was a pure crab. But I come to find out that he was working on our behalf, to make the very best out of the work that he could, and I've got great admiration for him now. What happened first was we started learning our parts and really not looking at the big picture. We were dwelling on what we were fixing to say and not on the whole picture of what was taking place. That was a problem. But when it did come together, it was real

exciting." And as it turned out, the play was embraced by the Family's local religious community.

4. LESSONS LEARNED AND HOW THEY CAN BE APPLIED

- *Tensions created by the different needs of a professional and a volunteer organization need to be anticipated and negotiated before project funding proposals are submitted.* This will require an act of faith by the partners, who will have to advance the costs for this planning with the expectation that the project will be funded, at which time their advance could be repaid.
- *The role of third-party producer/coordinator is crucial to an exchange project's success.* There are several reasons for this. Our project was ambitious in scope and quality, with much to negotiate artistically, culturally, and financially, and management of time, people, and money was a major requirement. In addition, documentation of the process and product, which was ACC's responsibility, would be important to future efforts. The artists were less stressed and more creative because these functions were competently performed by someone outside of either group. It was important to have ACC's overview of the entire project. Its staff person made suggestions and relayed information not perceived or understood by those involved in their particular company roles.
- *An exchange project can help organizations learn more about their own and each others' cultures and artistic processes.* New songs and stories were discovered and created from within each community's cultural traditions. The Mullins Family reports that their work on the Roadside play has added new music to their gospel repertoire, given their church-related performances new depth and crispness, and increased the size and diversity of their local audience. Roadside Theater has a new play in its national touring repertoire and is now creating an evening concert performance with the Mullins Family. The company recorded and released some of the music from the play on CD and is planning another recording. With ACC, Roadside is producing a booklet documenting the project. For Arts has been asked to tour its play to other communities in its state, and is producing a one-hour video about the creation of its play and the project's effect on its community. Casts of the two plays continue to exchange letters, local newspapers, and gifts, including a quilt commemorating the exchange made by and presented to For Arts by the Mullins Family.
- *An exchange project can help work against the feelings of isolation and marginalization that are often present in contemporary rural life.* For Arts and Roadside were often surprised to find similar details in the economic, educational, and cultural problems faced by their respective communities. Audiences at the performances responded with cheers to some of the lines in the plays that referred to these issues. For the For Arts performers and the Mullins Family Singers, the experience confirmed that their talents and their community's stories could result in excellent theater appreciated by neighbors and strangers alike.

5. ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

In both communities, there is a tradition of communal meals at corn shuckings and brandings and of gospel singing at baptisms and memorial meetings. At one time, there was storytelling in churches and country stores, on front porches, and around supper tables. At harvest celebrations both communities danced in the moonlight on fresh mowed fields. While community life is still important in Appalachia and the rural west, unquestionably the mass media has exerted a strong pull away from culture wedded to place. There are fewer and fewer public spaces and fewer occasions to be in those spaces.

The project not only created two unique plays, which contrasted, compared, and commented upon two distinct rural traditions, it was the occasion over a two-year period for all sorts of people to work together. After the exchange, the same mayor who arrived late for the performance and was turned away became so excited by the variety and enthusiasm of people taking part in the project that he proposed a plan to restore his town's abandoned theater. He views the project's community spirit as an intangible quality important to the revival of his town's depressed economy.

- *Issue: How do we create more opportunities for artists and communities to work together on public projects?*

Among U.S. folklorists, there is a general prejudice against theater as a forum for the presentation of the folk arts. This is understandable because there are not many U.S. working-class theaters and fewer folk theaters. There is a fear on the part of professional folklorists that folk traditions will be corrupted in the theatrical context. The project's folklorist had these concerns. After many conversations with Roadside, For Arts, the Mullins Family Singers, and community members participating as audience during production phases of the play; and after witnessing the final productions in their community settings, his worries disappeared. He was particularly excited by the way the members of the Mullins Family were able to be themselves on stage and at the same time be authentic in their dramatic roles. He told a story about how the matriarch of the Family said to him, "I don't know what all the fuss is about. We're just telling the stories we know -- the ones from our own family. And we've been singing all our lives. You know, there's more than one way to sing for the Lord."

- *Issue: What would it take for folk and community theater once again to become a vibrant American art form?*

The project demonstrates that broad public participation in the arts, like in sports, is the best guarantee for achievement and public support. When people do not just watch, but actually participate, they gain a visceral understanding of art and its value in their lives. They become arts advocates. And the more people who contribute creatively to the arts, the more creative the arts become.

- *Issue: Will private and public funding agencies seize the opportunity to help make participation in the arts available to all citizens?*

Not surprisingly, at some conscious or unconscious level, the project's artists and community participants understood that the exchange was about reclaiming in some small, transitory but significant way rural America's piece of the national soul.

- *Issue: Will we as individuals and as a body politic take the steps necessary to guarantee that our children, grands, and greats will have a living rural heritage to enjoy?*

At this point, the reader may want to refer back to the six aspirations that the three partners articulated at the project's outset.

Photos of *New Ground Revival* by Tim Cox. Photo of audience members by Dan Carraco.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dudley Cocke is the director of Roadside Theater. He is a writer, stage director, and producer. **Donna Porterfield** is managing director of Roadside Theater. She has been instrumental in the conception, management, and documentation of Roadside's community-building residencies and cross-cultural exchanges and collaborations.

SUGGESTED READING

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HYPERLINKS

Roadside Theater's web page - <http://www.appalshop.org/rst>

Appalshop's web page - <http://www.appalshop.org>

Community Arts Network's web page - <http://www.communityarts.net>

Webster's World of Cultural Democracy - <http://www.wxcd.org>

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