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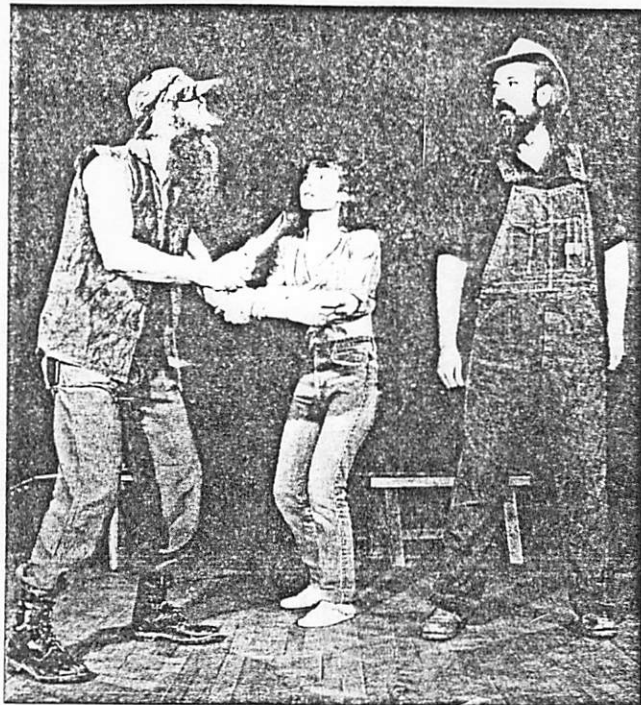
APPALACHIAN SPRING

By Alice M. Hale

The story and characters of *Leaving Egypt* are indigenous to the mountains. So are its creators, the Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Ky., whose dramatic identity is rooted in Appalachian tradition. Set in 1969, *Leaving Egypt*, written and composed by company member Ron Short, is the story of a man who finds himself in conflict with the modern world. He is the last remaining member of a mountaintop clan; the others have been driven away by feuds and poverty. When he learns of the federal government's plan to evict him, he brings his only two surviving relatives, a granddaughter and a nephew, back to the mountain to help him save the family home.

The events surrounding the arrival of the eviction notice are only a part of the play's action, though. Interwoven with the surface reality is a network of storytelling that provides a framework for and reflection of the lives of the characters. At the center are the "Jack" stories—folk tales, European in origin, of an archetypal figure named Jack who gets himself in and out of a variety of scrapes. As Dudley Cocke, Roadside's director, explains, "Grandfather is somebody who lives in a world that includes myth and Jack tales and the Bible, and all that is a way through life for him. He's a storyteller himself—as the fortunes of the family change from hour to hour, he makes that into a tale he tells the audience." Other stories figure into the action as well: the nephew, Benny, describes his Vietnam experiences and Shirley recounts her life in the city. As the three characters trade off stories, interspersed with the original songs by Short, they gradually come to terms with their crisis.

Cocke sees *Leaving Egypt*, which debuted in April and has been added to the company's touring repertoire, as the third part of a trilogy begun with two of Roadside's earlier works, *Pretty Polly* and *South of the Mountain*. All three have teamed Short as playwright with Cocke as director, and taken together the plays provide a history of the region. *Pretty Polly*, set in the



Tommy Bledsoe threatens Kim Cole and Ron Short in a scene from Roadside Theater's *Leaving Egypt*. The play, says director Dudley Cocke, gives ancient mountain stories a modern context.

late 1800s and early 1900s, follows the life of another storyteller who regales his listeners with fantastic legends of the mountains. *South of the Mountain*, which moves from the 1920s to the 1950s, tells of a farming family whose life gives way to the dominance of the coal industry. Of the latter play, Cocke remarks, "Usually after a performance of it around here any number of people will get up and testify as to how they went through that experience. It's a very emotional play to people because they have that immediate memory." *Leaving Egypt* could have the same immediacy for an even larger segment of the audience, hopes Cocke, including the region's young people.

"One of the things that is really important is our connection with an audience—working directly with them and using their imagination," says Short. When Roadside was founded 11 years ago, its purpose was "to make a theatre for people who never went to the theatre," according to Cocke. "That was not a missionary effort," he adds with a laugh, "because the people making the theatre didn't ever go to the theatre either." The writers and performers who started Roadside, all of whom were from the Central Appalachian mountains, realized that the farmers and miners of the

area would reject usual regional theatre fare. The young company turned instead to the legends, ballads, oral histories and church services with which they had grown up and developed a unique theatrical style of telling old mountain tales to an audience. They moved from folklore to historical stories of the region, creating a body of work they have toured in the rural Southeast as well as elsewhere in the U.S. and Europe.

While Roadside always wants to maintain a direct narrative connection with its audience, Short recently began to experiment with the form and content of the work. He and Cocke worked to give the ancient mountain stories a modern context, to create a script in which old and new, narrative and dramatic, were woven together.

Leaving Egypt developed slowly over the past two years, and rehearsals began in May 1986. The first several months of rehearsal were devoted to training Kim Cole, the young woman cast as Shirley. She had grown up in the area, but had minimal experience on stage. Such casting is not unusual for Roadside. "None of us in this theatre came in with 10 years of experience," says Cocke. "Part of our goal is to make plays about this particular place and have them

performed by people from this particular place, which means that we have to spend a lot of time training people because there's not a reservoir of actors hanging around the Central Appalachia coal mines."

The development process for Roadside's work is not complete until local audiences preview the piece, and *Leaving Egypt* was no exception. Comments from the audience are not taken lightly. "It's not 'Did you hear what that guy said?'" insists Cocks. "We really listen to what everybody says, and we take notes and then we spend a good bit of time analyzing the feedback in terms of what we need to do next." It is all part of Roadside's intent to make the audience a part of the creative process. "We're interested not in mystifying the creative process, but revealing it," says Cocks. Short points out that the theatre was founded for the community, which has changed along with Roadside. "I think this play is different from what they're used to, and I think it's going to call for new growth from them as well. But I think they're ready."