

Appalachian spring wafts into New York

By John Beaufort

New York

Appalachia has paid a spring call on the Big Apple.

The visitors were members of the Roadside Theater Company of Whitesburg, Kentucky (pop. 1,300). They came to the Manhattan Theater Club to perform in their three-man story-drama, "Red Fox/Second Hangin'." The factually-based mountain tale of the 1890s was

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written by Don Baker and Dudley Cocke, and acted by Mr. Baker, Gary Slemp, and Frankie Taylor. The production combined dramatic and Southern Appalachian story-telling techniques with the use of slides of period photographs and motion pictures. It was a remarkable entertainment, the likes of which New York folks don't encounter every day.

"Red Fox" concerns events that took place in the 1880s and 1890s in the Cumberland Mountains, "where Virginia and Kentucky back up on one another." The central figure is the legendary Doc Taylor, a popular preacher, whose activities also included doctoring, surveying, and serving as U.S. marshal. Taylor acquired the nickname of Red Fox from his uncanny ability "to slip through the woods unnatural like." In 1893, he was hanged for murder, the second hanging in the 27-year history of Wise County. The first man hanged, less than 14 months previously, was Bad Talt Hall, whom



By Gerry Goodstein

'Red Fox/Second Hangin': a different version

Taylor as a special deputy had tracked down and arrested.

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" unfolds the close connection between the two events and their relationship to the Big Stone Gap industrialists and financiers who invaded the mountains in the speculative boom of 1890-93.

'Correcting the record'

Mr. Cocke explained in an interview that one of the reasons for doing Doc Taylor's story was "to correct the historic record." Part of the story was told from quite a different angle in John J. Fox Jr.'s "The Trail of the Lone-

some Pine," a romantic best-seller published in 1908 and later filmed by Hollywood. According to Mr. Cocke, Fox took considerable romantic liberties with the facts.

For their version, the "Red Fox" collaborators went to original court records, newspaper clippings, and other available sources. Most important, they went to the mountain folk who had grown up with the stories of the events and individuals concerned.

"Our version has been kept alive by people," said Mr. Cocke. "It was different from much of what had been published. But we also discovered that accounts in books differed much more widely from each other than the recollections of the different people we talked with. So what we're saying is, 'Here's another look at this time.'"

An Appalshop project

Taylor and Cocke converted their material into a blend of story-telling and drama in which the trio of young actors alternately narrate and re-enact the complex account of what happened. Working on an almost bare stage and with the simplest of props, the cast draws the spectator irresistibly into this strange story of mountain conflicts, the coming of big-money exploiters, and the corruption of justice.

In its own very vivid way, "Red Fox" reflects the basic purpose of Appalshop, Inc., the parent organization to which Roadside Theater belongs. Appalshop was founded in 1969 by the Office of Economic Opportunity to record the heritage and struggle for survival of the people in the Appalachian region of mountains and coal mines.

Now an independent cooperative financed by federal, state, foundation, and private funding, it is one of the 10 largest arts organizations in Kentucky, with a yearly budget of about \$300,000. Appalshop has trained and employed more than 100 people in various media-arts disciplines. Its projects include documentary films, still photography, June Appal Recordings, and Mountain Review, a quarterly magazine.

Roadside Theater was founded in 1974 by Mr. Baker and several others with the idea of discovering a kind of theatrical form that made sense for mountain audiences. The troupe began telling traditional "Grandfather" tales unique to its part of the southern Appalachians. Sometimes in unison, sometimes "bating lines back and forth, feeding off of each other's rhythms," they developed a style which they ultimately applied to "Red Fox," which premiered in 1976.

'No home theater'

"A road company with no home theater," Roadside performs in churches, theaters, schools, and colleges, community centers, tents, prisons, and at festivals. Some old-timers attend performances just to see if the young fellows are going to get the facts right.

Roadside's only full-time professional is Mr. Cocke, who manages the company and serves as chief technician. Mr. Baker is a part-time contractor. Mr. Taylor farms when he isn't on the road. Mr. Slemp operates a recording studio but claims to have been an actor all his life. The three players grew up together in the mountains. The richness of their performance springs from their common roots and perhaps also from the fact each is in some way related to Doc Taylor.

Asked about possible new projects for Roadside, Mr. Taylor mentioned the history of the United Mine Workers as a vast natural resource waiting to be tapped.

"The history of the union is full of stories and great characters," said Mr. Taylor.

Meanwhile, the company will continue its barnstorming way of life, telling oft-told tales to mountain audiences, dipping into the rich reservoir of folk memory, and occasionally bringing big-city provincials a breath of authentic Americana.