

## Roadside Wanted to Put Our Region's Story in Play

**By Edward Wemytewa**

It took me some time to really understand Roadside's philosophy and their progressive movement. You can't see it right off hand. You see the face value, but only after you've worked with them in writing, in touring together, and meeting the other artists from other cultural backgrounds, other classes, do you begin to see the depth of work they're doing. One of the most profound experiences for me as a storyteller was even before we got into formal script writing and became formal collaborative partners in 1993. Some students from my community came for an exchange with Zuni kids and Haysi, Virginia High School kids and other kids from Norton Virginia. The performance that we did eventually at Appalshop ended up being three theater groups. It was Zuni and then there was the Macedonian Baptist Church Choir from the African American community in Harland County, Kentucky, and Roadside theater. That evening when we had our performance, it went so well, especially the closing number. Our Zuni flutist played a verse of a song (Amazing Grace), then Ron Short from Roadside Theater sang a verse in the Appalachian style, next a young child from the Macedonia Choir picked up the baton, and then it was closed by an elder woman from the Choir leading the audience in the last verse. The song was so strong that I just couldn't believe the impact, the emotional connection that I had that evening.

I think Roadside and Appalshop in general are doing incredible work and one of the most obvious things for me early on, was that they connected with their community. I have to say that when I make this comment it's honoring Roadside Theater and Appalshop but it's also honoring the people at large. Because when we had our first performances, audiences from Whitesburg were receptive. It's incredible how they were in tune with our stories. It was a full house. They were on cue with their responses, and when we told the stories they knew when to laugh and were very respectful. That's what made us believe in theater.

So, Roadside was important, but I think that it was the people that supported Roadside within their local community that made Roadside theater grow and develop into what exists today. It's a diverse environment now. In order to survive we can't wait for things to come, we can't be reactive, we've got to be proactive.

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