



Roadside Theatre performance in women's prison in Alabama

Native storytelling effort

By MELISSA STRONG

The Roadside Theater, headquartered in Whitesburg, Ky., was formed in 1973 as a regional theatre in an effort to familiarize native Appalachians with their strong dramatic tradition of storytelling and music in the area. Since then, two productions have emerged, "Tales" and "Red Fox/Second Hangin'."

The productions have been performed at grade schools, high schools, colleges, prisons, festivals, theaters, picnics, country fairs, community centers, and churches in the five state central Appalachian area and have included travels to southern Alabama, New York City, and the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

The most recent on-the-road performance was in central Alabama during the month of August when the five-man troupe performed in three prisons, at a community college, and in an open air amphitheatre. The three prisons, according to a spokesman for the group, Don Baker, were like three different concepts of a prison. "Draper, the men's prison, was scary, the conditions were bad, and response was not as good there as at the women's and juvenile prisons."

"Tutwiler, the women's prison, was a prison where things were more at ease. Response was good there, but not as good as at Frank Lee, the juvenile prison. Tutwiler was halfway in between the men's and the juvenile's. Frank Lee was my idea of a model prison," Baker continued, "the men, all first offenders, were healthy looking and seemed comfortable."

On the whole, Baker was pleased with response to the performances. In addition to several performances at each prison, the troupe also held workshops in order to familiarize the inmates with the group's method of obtaining information and creating their own production.

"One of the major reasons the people in charge wanted us down there, and a major value to the whole thing, was that the stories we told were from this area naturally and were not from New York, stories that wouldn't make sense. Alabama prisons especially in their attempt to reform are using this type of material more and more."

The "Tales" are old mountain tales from the area that include Jack tales, stories from Richard Chase and James Taylor Adams, fantasy tales, old jokes, and several musical numbers.

"If you tell them a story that means something to you," according to Baker, "it shows and they gain more from it." Baker believes there is "a good chance" that the inmates in Alabama will "pick up on our

ideas and produce stories of this type." He continued that stories of this type are "a way of getting out of the prisons to tell happenings inside." Part of the motivation in fact, according to Baker, would be "to have something to do to get out of the walls."

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" is the story of the murder of Ira Mullins and his family for which Doc Taylor, or the Red Fox, was hung back in the 1890's. The research for the production was not limited to history books, but included interviews with actual participants and their descendants, and researching old court records and numerous newspaper files. "We talked to one man in Richmond, Va., who as a boy of 13, saw Doc Taylor hung."

"In the workshops," according to Baker, "we emphasized this way of gathering material. For instance, in the prison system the men could interview old lifers and tell the funny side of a situation in the prison. A series of tales such as ours would be more effective here rather than a play."

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" has been blended into such a production. Films, photographs, slides, and a narrative type storytelling have been used to work together the story of Doc Taylor and the events that took place in Wise County and Letcher County, Ky. back in the 1890's. The performance is changed everytime it is given with tales being changed back and forth to see what works together best. "We're still in a molding process," according to Baker, "and will continue to work on it until we're satisfied. Eventually the performance will be finalized, but probably not for awhile."

The troupe that performed in Alabama was composed of Don Baker of Norton, Frank Taylor, formerly of Norton and now living in Dungannon, Jack Wright, Wise, Dudley Cocke, Norton, and Dudley Wilson who is no longer with the group.

"We felt comfortable in the prisons, it was amazing how comfortable we were. Convicts are just people, no matter what reason they are inside for, they are interested in the same things that other people are," according to Baker.

"None of us consider ourselves actors, I guess we're just 'hams,'" Baker said. "It doesn't take an actor to do this kind of performance; in fact, it's hard for a schooled actor to do this kind of stuff."

"Our performances have to do with rhythms of words and a way of speaking that we have heard all our lives. In fact, most people consider theatre alien or foreign, like New York and words being properly pronounced, but we don't deal with that."

"We're just a bunch of storytellers

telling stories to people that are interested in what we have to say."

A return engagement to the Alabama prison system is in the works for the spring. Before that, however, the Roadside Theater group has scheduled performances of "Red Fox/Second Hangin'" throughout the county underneath a 30 foot by 50 foot carnival tent. Dates, times, and locations for these performances will be announced at a later date.

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