

Cabbagetown Views Mountain Lore

By MARCIA KUNSTEL

Their history isn't written in books.

That's part of the reason the Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Ky., travels around the mountains, enacting a view of Appalachian life and times that the performers have gleaned from records, news clips and, perhaps most importantly, from the very people who lived them.

And now that view is being offered to pockets of Appalachian transplants like those living in Atlanta's Cabbagetown.

Even if the story were written in two-dimensional letters stamped on paper, the telling would fall far short of the rich experience presented to Cabbagetown children and community residents recently in the two-hour play, "Red Fox/Second Hanging."

It is a multi-media work, with three men alternately narrating, storytelling and playing multiple roles against the backdrop of 1800s photos flashed upon the makeshift screen of an upended trampoline.

Their stage was the carpeted floor of a school library, their costume common khakis and overalls, and their scenery the projected black and white pictures of muted mountain hollows and stark portraits from another era.

It wasn't elaborate theatre. But could a simple written history carry the impact of a sing-song dialogue abruptly shattered by the joyous shriek of an aspiring stage outlaw who just felled his first victim?

Or could a book startle its readers as the audience was jolted by a still, wooden wagon on the screen suddenly lurching into motion as the slides became a moving picture?

The variety of techniques, including actor establishing intimacy with viewer through prolonged eye contact or a touch on the sleeve of a rapt front-row child, combined into a learning experience that history books cannot apoch.

The story basically is that of M.B. "Doc" Taylor of Scott County, Va., whose long red beard and hair and whose cunning exploits as actor, minister, marshall and

finally forest fugitive earned him the title of the "Red Fox."

The play also is the story of Talton Hall, born in Letcher County, Ky., who author/performer Don Baker described as "the Jesse James of his day."

The two were arch-enemies, and both were hung little more than a year apart in gallows erected at the Wise County Courthouse in southwestern Virginia.

It is the story of a people, as well, however—their response to a Civil War especially fratricidal in the isolated mountain reaches, their often bawdy yet spartan life in the 1800s, their inability to ward off encroachment by developers who came to conquer the riches of timber, coal and iron ore.

It is history.

It isn't a refined version that backs away from the violence, liquor and promiscuous men and women of the day.

But neither does it portray "Doc" Taylor as the virtual illiterate he is described to be in a popular novel and history, not when his personal family Bible is inscribed in a flourishing hand that relates thoughts of an esoteric religious philosophy.

Baker was the primary researcher, who wrote the play in conjunction with equipment man Dudley Cocks, and the discrepancies he said he found between the books and his own acquired knowledge of people like "Doc" Taylor are part of the reason he takes the Roadside Theater on the road.

The theater, a branch of The Appalshop, a nonprofit, media-art cooperative in Whitesburg, soon will expand its geographic scope from the Appalachians to communities of mountain people in cities like Cincinnati and Chicago. The troupe of Baker, Frankie Taylor and Gary Slep also has a Greenwich Village engagement scheduled.

It took two years to put together "Red Fox/Second Hanging," a product that emerged from a compilation of oral interviews, newspaper files and court records that rested undisturbed for years in the courthouse attic.

"They were covered with coal dust that thick," Baker said, inserting a space a cou-

ple inches wide between his thumb and forefinger.

Baker and his fellow players don't work exclusively for the sake of academic purity, but for the sake of people.

"I know how embarrassed I was to be a hillbilly," Baker said. "We do this to say, 'Look, you've got a tradition, not only people and stories and characters to be proud of, but a style that's special.'"

Performer Frankie Taylor said that style—storytelling of the rich variety that intersperses thigh-slapping shouts with quiet narration—was lifted from the people they

went to for the stories, for the oral history of the mountains.

"It's important to them. They take it with pride," he said. "Stage theater, with costumes and polite stuff, that just don't work in the mountains."

So Roadside Theater is taking the memories and the documents of events, and giving them back in the tradition that does work.

"It's the first time, where we live, that anybody has done a play about us," Taylor said. "We owe it to our people."



Staff Photo—Jerome McClendon

ROADSIDE THEATER PERFORMS AT GRANT PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Techniques Are Used for a Learning Experience History Books Can't Rival