

Genuine poignancy allows tale of Appalachian family to soar

By Terry Morris
THEATER CRITIC

It's 1969, somewhere in the mountains of central Appalachia, and the Hall family is about to lose the ancestral land to a utility company backed by the government's power of eminent domain.

Only three remain on the homestead. Aging family sage Grandpa has gathered around him his last two relatives from what was once a huge clan — nephew Benny, deeply scarred by Vietnam, and granddaughter Shirley, a victim of lost love and city cruelty.

The Roadside Theater's storytelling drama *Leaving Egypt* might be just another homespun tale of the little people losing to the big people if there wasn't so much more to it. There's love, laughter, heartfelt music and, finally, a genuine poignancy that lifts this touring production out of the category of the ordinary.

Presented by Cityfolk at Sinclair Community College's Blair Hall Theatre Saturday night, with a repeat performance scheduled this afternoon, *Leaving Egypt* carries out Whitesburg,

REVIEW

Ky.-based Roadside's purpose of preserving Appalachian culture without sermonizing. Although this is loosely structured theater, it is theater with impact.

If Ron Short's original script and varied songs aren't enough, he also plays the role of Grandpa so effectively that he has the audience eating out of his hand whenever he shares a seemingly impromptu aside with those looking on. This effectively draws the spectators in at the beginning, and reasserts its grip on them as the action progresses.

The play also features the bushy red-bearded Tommy Bledsoe as Benny and Kim Neal Cole as Shirley. Directed by Dudley Cocke, the troupe's artistic director, the staging is simple, with a few wooden chairs and a screen door against a backdrop of mountain sky.

Although Grandpa's strange and rambling family history tales and legends often test the patience of more modern-minded Benny and Shirley, there is always a moral lurking inside.

One, about the people who turn their chores and trust over to a tribe of giants until the children begin disappearing, is all about independence, for example. The giants just might be the government.

Benny has known since being caught in a Viet Cong ambush that the only way America could win that war would be to kill every man, woman and child in Vietnam. It's a good bet that there's also no way the power company or anyone else can really wipe out the spirit of the mountains.

Shirley, dragged away from prostitution and lonely bitterness in Dayton, finds her family loyalties, and feelings, reawakening.

The Egypt of the play's title is their land. They know they're going to have to leave it, but they aren't going to go without taking it with them in memories.

■ **ROADSIDE THEATRE** of Whitesburg, Ky., will present *Leaving Egypt* again at 2 p.m. today in Blair Hall Theatre in Building 2 of Sinclair Community College. Tickets are \$8.