

Santa Barbara, CA

Stopping along the Roadside

By Bob Barber

Roadside Theater, which has its home in the central Appalachian coalfields of southwestern Virginia and Eastern Kentucky, has concluded a visit to UCSB that included two public performances and several community events.

Three Roadside actors presented "Leaving Egypt," which is made up of ballads and rambling stories with a point — eventually. The show was presented in the UCSB Main Theater Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon.

The residency included a performance at Kellogg School, a class with City College's Chicano Theater Project, a visit to Transition House and an oral history program with Carrillo Retirement Hotel residents.

Presenting "Leaving Egypt" (read "Leaving Home") were two charismatic, down-home actors with a lot of depth, Ron Short and Tommy Bledsoe, and Kim Neal Cole, who joined the troupe four years ago after seeing them perform at her high school. All are from Appalachia. Short and Cole are from Big Stone Gap, Va., and Bledsoe lives in Snowflake, Va.

Sunday's matinee seemed leisurely and lasted just over two hours, with an intermission. It combined down-home humor and wit with some raw moments of scarring emotion.

"Leaving Egypt" concerns a man whose family has lived, and buried their dead, on the same mountain for many, many years. The power company, with cooperation from authorities from the local sheriff to Washington, D.C., is taking the land to build a dam and power station.

With the old man are his bruised, weary granddaughter and his nephew, just back from Vietnam (the time of the story is 1969).

Short, author of "Leaving Egypt," played the wise, story-telling old grandfather; Bledsoe was the troubled veteran who can't for-

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get the blood and death in Vietnam; and Cole was the granddaughter with troubled memories of her times in the big city of Dayton, Ohio.

It's a strong, attractive ensemble company, with stories well worth listening to and some poignant and some foot-stomping music.

One of the tales was about Lester. "He made medicine," Short told us. And after a pause: "Liquor." Another pause. "For a living."

After a beautiful (and beautifully done) song, "Cities of Gold," Short said, "That ain't nuthin'. We could do that all night," followed by a friendly, truthful, not boastful smile.

Then came a long story about a character named Jack and his many adventures. Jack was a sailor, a soldier and head of a church (kind of a god). Things just worked out for Jack.

After we heard a record playing offstage, philosopher Short said, with a wry smile, "It's come to the point where people are willing to let other people do their singing for them."

Songs inserted into the story of adversity on the mountain included "The Law Is Right, Even When It's Wrong," "Someone Who Needs Me in This World," "In Your Dreams, Try to Think of Me," "The Moon Is Shining on the Mountains," the chilling "Vietnam" and "I'm Leavin' Today," a gospel-flavored tune.

How did the story end? It didn't. As the old man said, "Our story comes to a resting place. We're waiting for somebody else to come along and carry it on."

Dudley Cocke, from Norton, Va., directed in we're-not-in-a-hurry-and hope you-aren't-either fashion. The fascinating lighting and shadowy backdrop gave a strong impression of tall trees and green leaves.

The UCSB Department of Dramatic Art co-sponsored the residency, with the Western States Arts Federation, California Arts Council, National Endowments for the Arts and L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation.

Bob Barber, a retired editor and reporter, frequently reviews theater for the News-Press.



Kim Neal Cole played the troubled granddaughter and Tommy Bledsoe as the Vietnam veteran couldn't forget the blood and death in Roadside Theater's "Leaving Egypt."