

Roadside Theater hits home with day's second performance

By Beti Trauth
For the Times-Standard

ARCATA — Roadside Theater is a traveling cultural treasure — a whimsical, thought-provoking and thoroughly entertaining celebration of tales and songs based on regional stories and music handed down through generations of farmers and miners of the Central Appalachian mountains.

Three marvelous members of this unique troupe of entertainers spun their magic web of enchantment in two performances at Humboldt State University's Van Duzer Theatre last weekend.

The matinee, "Mountain Tales and Music," was a short, sprightly combination of tall tales and down-home ditties targeted for youngsters. Sing-alongs and audience participation were encouraged and dominated the program. Ron Short, Tommy Bledsoe and Kim Cole took turns playing, singing and shifting back and forth from storyteller to characters in stories — sometimes overlapping dialogue and ideas in seamless fashion. They were delightful — but the depth of their talent was not apparent until the evening performance, "Leaving

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Egypt." I'm glad I attended both; had I attended just the matinee, I would never have known just how fantastic these performers are.

"Leaving Egypt" gave the trio a perfect vehicle to showcase the story of a mountain family that must face the potential loss of their ancestral land. Short was the crusty Grampa, full of spit and vinegar and the tallest of tales. Equally feisty and head-strong, his granddaughter spars with the outside world's sorrows, but returns to her roots to rebuild her life. Cole brought this woman a strength and inborn dignity that was both tender and unshakable. Bledsoe played the deeply troubled, just-returned Vietnam veteran who left part of his soul in the torched remains of a torched jungle village.

THEATER REVIEW

Together, this trio of reunited branches of the family tree must combine their wits and strength to outwit the establishment that wants to take over their land and cover it with water, building a dam in the name of progress.

As the characters dealt with the issues and solutions, songs and stories were interwoven into the piece that served as commentary and offered possible action.

"The Law is Right, Even When it's Wrong." sung by Short and Bledsoe.

• See ROADSIDE, Page 7

ROADSIDE

FROM 6

brought home the point with an all-too-true observation. "Don't people ever talk anymore?" Grampa laments. "This whole world is run with little pieces of paper."

As the family sifts back through its lives, problems and pain, it comes to a conclusion. "As long as you can remember where you came from — your people, your land — nothin's ever lost or dead or gone, long as somebody remembers."

They'll fight for their home anyway they can — Grampa uses scary legends to keep the stangers at bay: "It doesn't matter if something's true," he reveals, "as long as people believe it is."

The granddaughter relies on her memories: "As long as I can remember the kid I was, dreamin' in a bayloft, I won't let go of where I

came from."

There's also the sad understanding of the mountain boy who realized in Vietnam that "the only way we were gonna win was to kill everybody. Because these people were fightin' for their homes. We didn't even know where we were."

This mountain family will fight because they know where they are. They're home.

Thanks to the Roadside Theater, the heritage of the past will continue to live in the future in stories and songs reminding us that, "It don't matter where you are — what matters is where you came from."