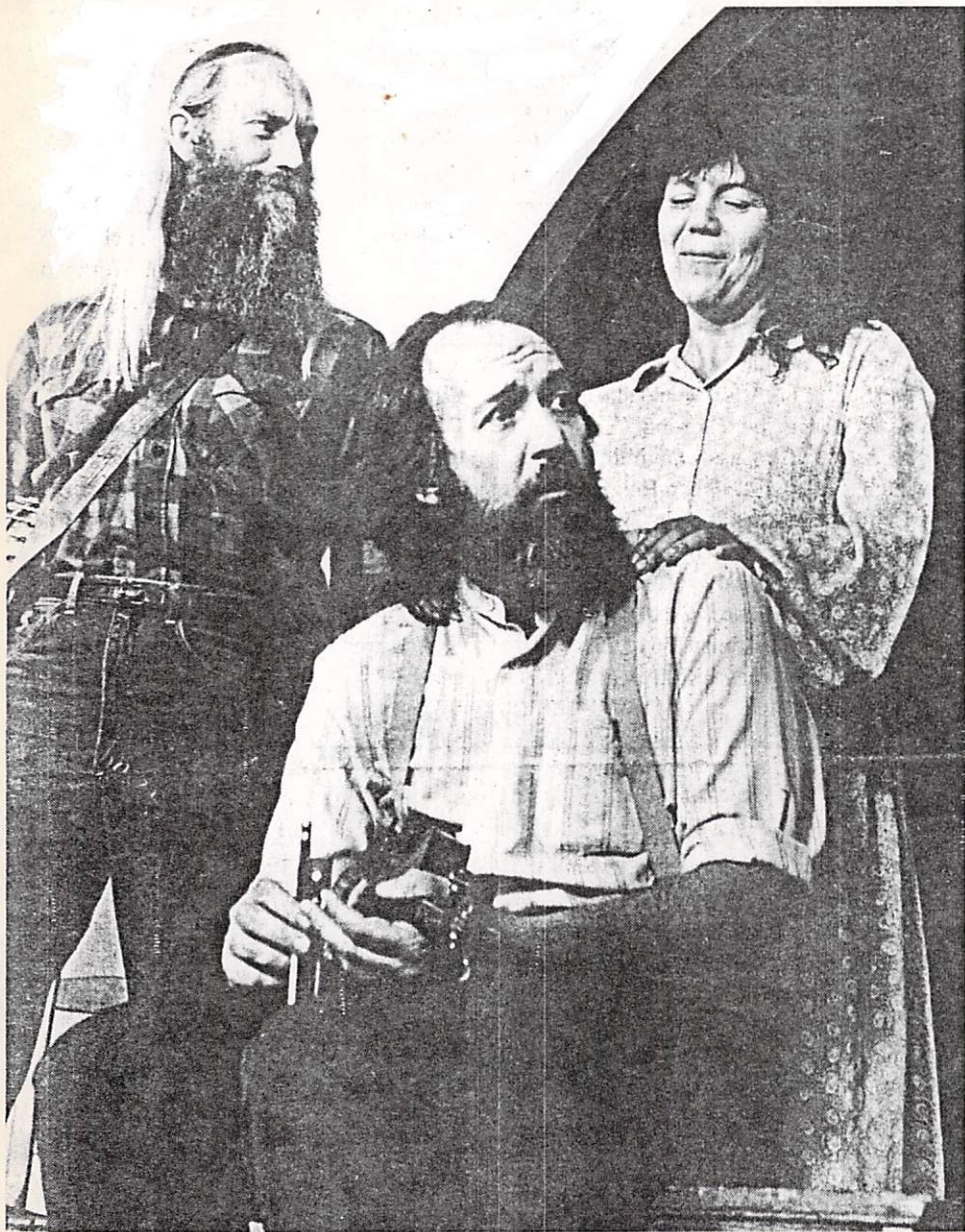


Pretty Polly, A Review *by George Vafiadis*



Roadside Theater's PRETTY POLLY—*from left:*
Tommy Bledsoe, Ron Short, Angie DeBord
Photo by Carol Teach

April 8th, Bates' Schaeffer Theater—the stage is bare except for soft light, a bench, a box, a small table, and an old rocker. Simplicity. Three performers from Roadside Theater ambled onstage without fanfare, introduction, or even dimming of house lights. They were easy. Acknowledging the audience with smiles and nods, they eased into a song, with banjo and fiddle, and *Pretty Polly* was on.

Polly Johnson's rich Appalachian mountain life—she was portrayed in her 87th year—formed the backdrop for several potent, tough, mythic, and charming stories. Told and sung by actors Angie DeBord, Ron Short, and Tommy Bledsoe, mountain people themselves and now based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, these stories captured our imaginations. With what can be termed artless simplicity, the trio shared with us the great love they have for their roots and heritage. From their dress—everything contributing to character and flavor—to the twang in their voices and the authentic mountain music, every element helped take us on this wonderful trip to their home, their friends, and their legends.

The memories, songs, and stories encompassed many moods, humorous to outlandish to quietly horrible. One story, about a hunter, the Hairy Man, and the Hairy Woman who lived in a cave, was rolling right along with humor and sharply etched images—when Ron, as narrator, stunned us with the lines, “and they tore the baby in half.” I couldn't help admiring the toughness of the legend and this partly metaphoric act, and I was impressed with how the performer totally held his audience and used this muted horror to great dramatic effect.

Angie played the central character, Polly. Aided only by the external elements of a long print dress and pulled-back hair, she presented with deft strokes a complete grandmotherly figure, slow in movement and speech, thin-voiced yet resonant, and as eternal and tough as a mountain ash. Occasionally Angie played other characters who were vibrant and youthful, including the wild Hairy Woman. Yet she always returned to Polly,

slipping into this character with such ease that, to my eye, it was seamless. We were hardpressed to see what, specifically, she had done to change characters—yet there she was, slowly nodding her head in contemplation, rocking, one hand in her lap and the other smoothing her dress, not a wasted movement—the universal grandmother.

The funniest story of the evening was Tommy's Lumberheaded Bass fish-story. This performer is a master in the use of his eyes to highlight not only his own material but also the stories of the others. Almost always up-center on the stage, Tommy listened intently to Ron's or Angie's story, focused steadily yet never rigidly on the teller. It was as if his eyes were a movie camera with the power to direct our attention. Should our eyes drift from the actor speaking to Tommy, he would direct us back to the proper focus by urging us to follow his keen expressive eyes. Indeed, this trio obviously has performed together many times, so focused and in tune with each other as they were.

Perhaps the strongest performer was Ron. He showed complete involvement as well as a superlative sense of the dramatic, which he never shied from using—nor overused. He has rare stage presence and possesses the ability to lure us into stories naturally and effortlessly. Then he could step outside the character and become the narrator, with conscious yet controlled theatricality; he would shift from the natural to the presentational, and we made these changes with him without missing a beat or feeling any dramatic manipulation or excess.

Artless simplicity. These actors stood on stage and, through their mountain eyes, looked at us, their New England audience, and invited us, in turn, to view the subtly complex fabric of their tales. They were prepared to risk, and they convinced us to risk as well—to laugh, to gasp, to smile, even to be “had.” All from the power of their wonderful words, from the mouths of these wonderful actors. Let's have them back again. •