

Penygraig, July 22

David Adams

Mountain Tales

The communities of the Rhondda might well be justified in thinking that the visits of the American Roadside Theater company to various local venues have a bit more point than the performances the group gave as part of the London International Festival of Theatre. Maybe the boys were being nice when they said that LIFT was merely a way of enabling them to get to the South Wales gigs, the only dates they have organised outside London.

But there's no doubt that the engaging and committed style of this Appalachian band of story-tellers and musicians reached out to the enthusiastic audience at the Soar Ffrwdamos Centre in Penygraig, for example, in a way that would be difficult to imagine at a metropolitan theatre festival. In London audiences come to watch, said the guy with the banjo and ZZ Top waistlength red beard, here everyone's part of the show. And he certainly looked at home.

Roadside Theater are distinctive and proud of where they come from, but when they sing and talk about the coalfields of south-west Virginia and east Kentucky, the lot of the working people there, the strike currently being waged against the employers, the colour of the Government, then an awful lot of chords are struck. The Rhondda may now have no more pits but it has lots of memories and a rousing version of Whose Side Are You On? received applause that was more than simply appreciative of the sizeable talents of the performers.

Politics emerges gradually and is never polemical. Like that of the Rhondda audiences, it's part and parcel of everyday life in a tight knit mining community and is as natural as the popular folk tales about the first rainbow or the bad blacksmith who makes his own hell, all performed with an unaffected infectious ease and a growing rapport with the audience that makes their show a truly warming experience. Everyone just wished it had gone on longer.