

An Appalachian Drama Captures Washington Audience

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WASHINGTON, May 11—A troupe of Appalachian Mountain players whose members have spent two years developing a special theatrical form for their own people is discovering that city folks, too, respond enthusiastically to their tale-telling drama.

In the process, members of the roving Roadside Theater, as they call themselves, have had to revise the history of M.E. (Doc) Taylor, one of the legendary bad gunmen of the Appalachians at the turn of the century.

The result, which was on view at a one-night stand here yesterday and opens in New York on Thursday for 11 performances, was as stirring to the Washington audience for its historical detective work as for the vanishing art of frontier yarnspinning.

"Red Fox-Second Hangin'" is the Roadside Theater's three-man dramatization of the pursuit, trial and hanging of the red-haired, red-bearded Taylor and his execution at Wise, Va., on Oct. 27 1893. Don Baker, the 32-year-old scenarist, said this his research work for the drama had shown him

that "history isn't frozen in books any more than Watergate was explained by White House press releases."

In the few published accounts that touch on Taylor's life, one in the novel "Trail of the Lonesome Pine," and in clippings from the National Police Gazette in the 1890's, Taylor appeared as the Police Gazette styled him, "a brutal Southern bandit."

A Notorious Character

He was as notorious in his Appalachian area as was Capt. Anderson Hatfield, a central character in the Hatfield-McCoy feud that raged at about the same time across the Kentucky-West Virginia border. This was just north of Taylor's territory in the steep, timbered Kentucky counties of Wise and Letcher.

In 1975, Mr. Baker and Dudley Cocke, the 31-year-old Virginian who joined him in transforming the Roadside Theater's earlier experimental presentations about Taylor into the present production, began interviewing people around Wise, Va., and Whitesburg, Ky., who knew, or knew of, the "Red Fox." They heard of a basically good, at times almost saintly, man, a healer with some formal medical education and a mystic who read and wrote philosophy and the doctrines of the Swedenborgian Church while he was being, simultaneously, a lawman and a ladies' man.

However, Taylor and some cohorts were thought to have staged a masked ambush on a mountain trail of the family of Ira Mullins, a moonshiner who had put a \$300 bounty on Taylor's head, and killed them all except Mullins's sister, Jane. In the dusty attic of the Wise County Courthouse, the two scenarists found the transcript of the trial, among other long-forgotten Taylor documents.

Portions of the actual transcript, including an identification of the defendant by Jane Mullins, who testified that she "would know Doc Taylor with his head cut off and with his back turned to me," become lines in the players' assertion that Taylor was innocent, and framed.

It makes no difference to the Wise County jurors that Taylor carried a Winchester, and the spent shells found at the ambush scene were from rim-fire weapons. Taylor is sentenced to hang.

The hillbilly narration by Mr. Baker and Gary Slemp and Frank Taylor, the two other performers, is rapid, riveting and often funny, while Mr. Cocke, as stage manager, projects tintype photographs of stark Appalachian faces and places as a backdrop.

Now Proud of Heritage

"I know how embarrassed I was once to be a hillbilly," Mr. Baker said. "We do this to say to mountain people, 'Look, you've got a tradition—not only people and stories and history to be proud of, but a style that's special.'" He and Mr. Slemp explained the logistics of the troupe's recent, well-received five-week tour of Atlanta, Knoxville, Tenn., Dayton, Ohio, Chicago, Cleveland and Cincinnati by saying "we have been travelling in a beat up old Peugeot, cramped in there like four sardines in a can."

In the audience here last night at the Grace Episcopal Church was Randy Lawrence, a 22-year-old great-great nephew of Taylor, from Welch, W. Va., who is writing a doctoral thesis at Duke University on Appalachian history.

"My grandma was a Taylor," Mr. Lawrence said. "Her uncle was Doc Taylor. The Roadside Theater has got a really interesting new version here. The family tradition says he was pretty much a rogue."

The New York run of "Red Fox-Second Hangin'" will be Thursday through May 22. It is to be the second part of a double bill with "Carol in Winter Sunlight," by Arthur Sainer, at the Theater for the New City, 113 Jane Street.

The Roadside Theater was founded in 1974 as part of Appalshop Inc., a nonprofit, cooperative media center in Whitesburg, Ky., that produces still photographs, films, phonograph records and a quarterly magazine, the Mountain Review, as well as plays.



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Frank Taylor, left, Don Baker, center, and Gary Slemp of the Roadside Theater during performance in Washington of "Red Fox/Second Hangin'."