

'South Of The Mountain' Has Human Touch

By J.L.L. JOHNSON
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Events Inc.'s third offering, the Roadside Theater's "South of the Mountain," a musical folk epic celebrating the dignity and endurance of Appalachian America, so engrossed the capacity audience at Dock Street Theatre that by the end of the evening, everyone was singing along with the concluding folk trio, "But I remember the way my daddy laughed and the way my mamma smiled."

The conclusion of the opening-night production Wednesday was one of the most touching moments in recent Dock Street Theater history, and a fitting ending to a magnificently unique evening of musical theatre.

Ron Short's "South of the Mountain" is based on the oral reflections of his family and traces in monologues and music the fortunes of Appalachia, epitomized by two generations of a mountain family, from its beginning in farming to its present situation as a depressed center of coal mining.

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The first part of the program is a celebration of a rural life that is harsh in living conditions, but warm in human companionship. Tom Bledsoe, the farm brother, wins the complete empathy of the audience when he brings a member of the audience up on stage to join in a dance. There are a number of joyous trios, "Cities of Gold," "Peaches in the Summer Time; Apples in the Fall," and "Good Old Things on the Farm." The monologues by the characters deal with the harshness of the land and the way the country children were laughed at in school, but they are spiced with wry humor. As the mother, Nancy Jeffrey sings a noble ballad "This Land" that summarizes the theme of this first section of the show.

The second part of "South of the Mountain" deals with the family after it has been split up by industrialization. Ron Short, the prodigal son, who hits the high life of the coal towns in a number "Gonna Change my Style," has more material comforts, but suffers from black lung and unemployment.

The farm brother, Tom Bledsoe, is left alone and sums up his isolation in the intense "Wish I'd Have Known." Nancy Jeffrey, the mother of the first

half, has become the young wife of the coal miner, and she has several touching ballads.

Significantly, the second half of the program consists almost completely of folk solos, emphasizing the loss and isolation of the characters. The penultimate number of the show is a duet, "Take Me Back," and the final curtain call trio unifies both the past and the present of Appalachia, and the three talented performers with their audience.

Ron Short's "South of the Mountain" is a musical drama with a social message that never becomes propagandistic. All of the performers have a remarkable naturalness in their responses to each other and to

the audience; this sort of "realistic" acting is the product of long rehearsals. Ron Short's country music score is tuneful and varied and, most importantly, both softens and enhances the drama. Co-directors Dudley Cocke and Ron Short manage to direct the show with such care that all of the characters' actions seem spontaneous. The humanity of the show is achieved by the complete credibility of the performers and their actions.