

PORTLAND

Roadside Theater tells riveting tales

By DONNA GOLD

Roadside Theater
Schaeffer Theatre
Bates College
Saturday, April 8

Roadside Theater came to the Schaeffer Theatre at Bates College Saturday night, from the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky and Virginia.

They came with tales of hairy women and coal miner husbands of cannibalistic men and hanged murderers all under the auspices of a play called "Pretty Polly."

It was, on the whole, a night of gruesome stories, leaving a haunted impression of Appalachian mountain valleys and the folks that inhabit them.

The stories were told by Tommy Bledsoe, musician and storyteller, from Snowflake, Va., Angelyn DeBord, a performer originally from North Carolina now living in Scott County, Va., and Ron Short, a musician, storyteller and writer from Big Stone Gap, Va.

The technique they use is called storytelling theatre.

Roadside's mission is to gather regional stories — those as they said Saturday, that are not in the history books — and retell them in semitheatrical form.

In this way, the tales become theater to the people who tell them and they become real to

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those who may never be privileged to sit on a porch by Moccasin Creek in Scott County, Va., drinking corn liquor and sharing the memories of ancient and present deeds.

Pretty Polly, herself, was a storyteller named Polly Branham Johnson, or Aunt Polly, born in Kentucky in 1864. She died across the mountain in Wise County, Va., in 1947.

"Pretty Polly" as told by Roadside is a loose collection of stories, many of them entered into by the three performers as if they were a part of a storytelling swap, the jibes between them, interwoven with songs.

The first half of the evening focused on ancient and folk tales, the second on historical events that have become local myths.

Some tales, mostly of the ancient variety, were mildly acted; with one or the other of the tellers performing characters in the narrated stories.

But the power of storytelling is in the stark focus on the individual teller and that person's ability to conjure up the characters and doings of the story. Roadside Theater's people are spellbinding storytellers.

Their acting-out of characters often detracted from their power.



Tommy Bledsoe, Angelyn DeBord and Ron Short put on a spellbinding show at Bates College Saturday.

Yet one of the more ancient, acted-out stories was the most fascinating and memorable of the evening.

It is a creation or discovery myth about the first white explorer who came up the river to the Appalachian territory.

It appears to be a European giant tale with the original discovered inhabitant being a 7- or 8-foot "hairy" woman. The explorer makes a home with the woman. She hunts, he "cave keeps;" together they bear a "hairy" child.

But then a boat comes and the white man is lured back to his own kind.

The simplicity of seeing DeBord standing huge on stage as the hairy woman howling over the loss of her man, lifting her arms high to rip the imaginary child in two, is chilling.

One is left with a vision of life

in which love inevitably ends in pain, if not early death, with perhaps some fishing, a bit of corn liquor — and of course, the storytelling — to ease the way.

Roadside's Theater has been in the Lewiston-Auburn area for one week and will remain through this week under the auspices of LA Arts.

They are conducting a residency among three Lewiston-Auburn classrooms and an adult group.

At 6:30 p.m. Friday, April 14, Roadside will close their residency with a story swap among the people with whom they have been working.

The event is free and open to the public; interested people should call Katherine Knowles at LA Arts, 782-7228, for more information.

Donna Gold is a free-lance writer living in Portland.