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Pretty Polly

ALBANY EMPIRE, DEPTFORD

Under the auspices of LIFT, Roadside Theater has brought three plays comprising their *Pine Mountain Trilogy* to depressed and ravaged South London – about as far, culturally speaking, as it is possible to get from the Kentucky/Virginia borders – the Appalachia of Copland and Delius.

Or perhaps not. Posters in Deptford High Street warn of encroaching developers and lament the profiteering in council house sales. While *Pretty Polly*, the first of the trilogy, deals with the homely yarn-spinning of one Polly Branham Johnson in the field of family history, tall stories and plain myth, I suspect subsequent chapters will underline similarities between rural hard times and urban deprivation. In both cases “they” out there, the vested interests, the guys with the chequebooks, the corporations, are moving in, and the little people have no say in the matter. *The Grapes of Wrath* at the National Theatre recently told the same story of disinheritance.

At any rate, *Pretty Polly* is a scene-setter to get us into the mood. A rocking chair, an upright seat, a bench and a rough slatted table make up the set. Banjo, fiddle and gui-

tar are brought into play in the first of the “three moonshine musicals.” The three performers stroll on: the check-shirted men are bearded, Tommy Bledsoe profusely so, the woman in a flower-print dress and lace-up boots has her hair in a bun. “Some people call us hillbillies,” says Ron Short ominously, adding, “some people do it only once.”

The form is that of an informal session of gossip, reminiscence and story-telling. The three interrupt one another, prompt, take over, digress, spark off arguments. The feeling is certainly one of community, even kinship. There are songs, in some of which the audience (responding a little timidly) are asked to join. To English spectators the impression is less Anglo-Saxon than Celtic; easy to imagine this bout of shared anecdote, history and legend with Irish or Scottish accents.

The stories range from direct accounts of family affairs to sheer fairy-story – fascinating to hear the primal elements of European folk-tales in the adventure of the girl who found herself eating a human finger in the cabin of her mysterious admirer (called “Mr Fox” as in all the best admonitory fables rooted in our

unconscious fears). There is even a warning bird (here a parrot) who addresses her by name and a locked room as in *Bluebeard*. There are tales of witchcraft and tall stories that shade into fantasy.

On Tuesday's first night some of it was heavy going for players and audience, with the cast unsure of how much to explain (I'm still uncertain of how real or mythical the self-destructive and reconstitutable joint-snake is) and some of the words swallowed by the accent. The set pieces kept the house's attention, however: the story of sister Ethel who pined away after outliving three young husbands and who claimed to see them in her room shortly before her death (a nice pay-off line here); and Angelyn Debord with a woman's account of the hanging of her brother.

Roadside Theater was founded on such true stories and an awareness of what constitutes cultural roots, background, a whole heritage. The remaining plays chart Appalachian life and people up to post-Vietnam disorientation; after Deptford the trilogy moves on to the Watermans, Brentford.

Martin Hoyle