

# Storytellers aiming to reinforce social fabric

By Donna Gold

LEWISTON — There's a Grace Paley short story in which a little girl has just discovered the phrase, "remember dat?"

"I slept in your bed with you," the little girl says, "Remember dat?"

It may be nothing but a simple anecdote, but it illuminates the absolute value of stories to life. With that phrase, as Paley writes, the girl "could name so many pictures in her head."

Stories are a human way of processing experience. Whether it be through family tales, schoolyard bravado, barroom boasting or religious myth, stories are our way to mark experience and pass it on.

This week, the Roadside Theater Ensemble, a storytelling theater growing out of the central Appalachian coal fields of southwest Virginia and eastern Kentucky, begins a residency in Lewiston-Auburn as a guest of LA Arts. For two weeks, theater members will work with two fourth-grade classes, one seventh-grade class and an adult group. Members of the ensemble will hear the stories of these mill towns, help both children and adults understand the value of their tales and guide the tellers through the communication process.

They will begin by getting to know each other. To do that, they will swap stories.

To Roadside, stories are more than tales, more than theater, they are an essential thread in the fabric of life. But, says Ron Short, one of the theater members participating in the residency, people need to be aware of their stories.

"We are concerned that people

control their stories," says Short. "If you are in control of your history then you are in control of your destiny. By controlling your stories and understanding why those stories and who they are about, you can often understand who has control of the economy, the politics — what attitudes prevail, and why."

Katherine Knowles, director of LA Arts, worked for two years to bring Roadside Theater to Lewiston-Auburn.

"Lewiston-Auburn probably has the greatest diversity of ethnic groups in the state. We want to break down the walls between the communities — show the value of our cultures, to show that what makes us unique is important. But overall, I want the residency to be fun."

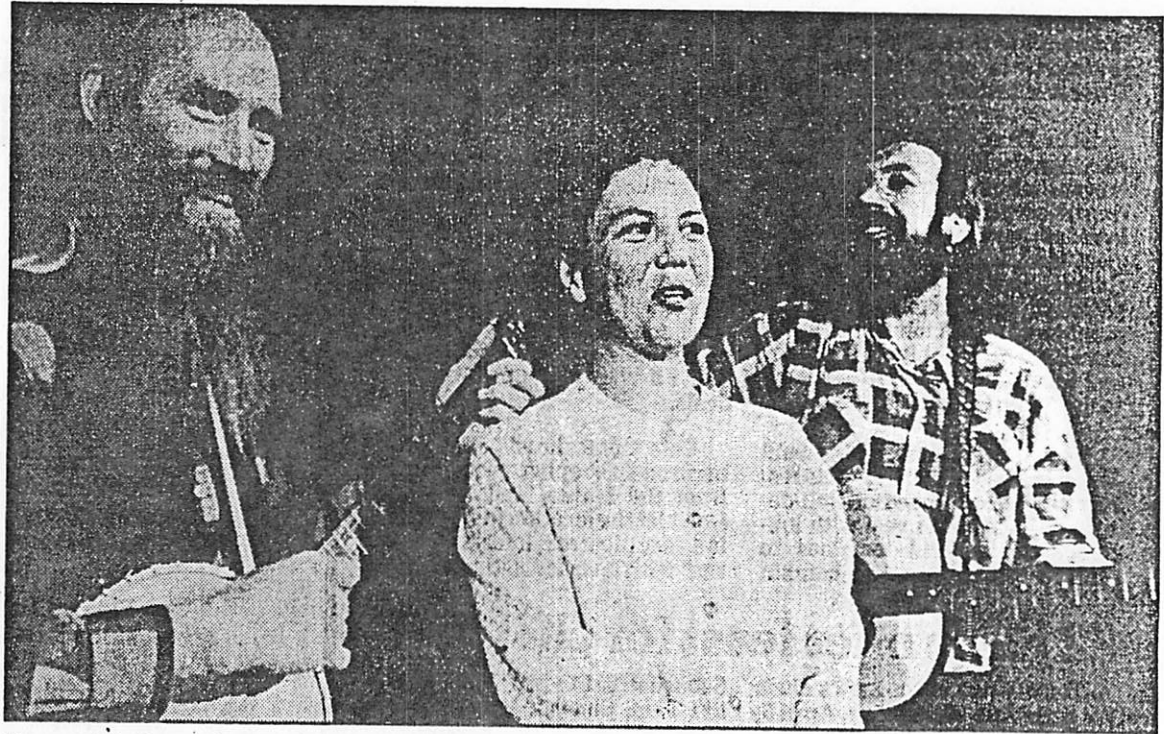
The intent, as Knowles recognizes, is to make art approachable. So once the Lewiston-Auburn fourth-graders tell their stories, they may illustrate them in a book, then create a video of the illustrated stories.

The ancient art of storytelling may seem to be an incongruous match for video, but Short points out that video is one of today's media and all of us — children and adults — need to take control of it.

Short's family told stories. And what happens with family stories, he says, is that "everyone in the family knows the story."

"As the story unfolds, one central character may begin with, 'Do you remember the time Uncle Harry crashed grandma's car?' Well, there's a guarantee that everyone can add to the story. 'It was just after Grandmother got it fixed. . . .' And people will have in mind the same lines, and almost say it together."

The layering of storytelling is part of Roadside's technique; the



Tommy Bledsoe, Angelyn DeBord and Ron Short of the Roadside Theater perform "Pretty Polly."

universality of the story is part of Roadside's philosophy. For most every family that uses a vehicle will have a version of that tale, and most every member of the family will have their version to add to the tale.

Eventually, the tale becomes an archetype of the family story and the continual tension between the quest for freedom and the need for connection that marks each generation.

On April 8, Roadside Theater will give a public performance of their tale, "Pretty Polly." Short says it's a look at storytelling from the perspective of Polly Branham Johnson, a Kentucky sto-

ryteller who lived from 1864 to 1947.

But it's also a look at the hanging of a man, and Appalachian history, which, he says, "starts with the laws of nature and man and conflict and ends with the laws of the land and nature and man and conflict — and what a strange encounter it is for a man to be hung — for society to advance to the point where we were killing each other publicly."

The Roadside Theater residency will culminate April 14 with

## Pretty Polly

When: Saturday, April 8, 8 p.m.

Where: Schaeffer Theater, Bates College, Lewiston

Tickets: \$7/\$5 students, seniors. Call 782-7228

an informal story swap among the participants. Call LA Arts at 782-7228 for more information.