

## STAGE REVIEW

# Song, story of folklore come alive

By Christopher Rawson  
Post-Gazette Drama Critic

**T**here's an old image of a rag-tag band of rural entertainers finally making it to the big city and straggling in, mouths agape.

Forget it. Sure, the Roadside Theater comes from hillbilly country, the Appalachian coalfields a couple of hundred miles south of here, and Pittsburgh is — or was, once upon a time — the economic

capital of Appalachia.

But who's more sophisticated than whom? The show these rural performers have brought us, "Brother Jack," seems an earthy, easy-going blend of folk song, comic commentary and storytelling, with an emphasis on the latter — but for dramatic presence and canny theatrical professionalism, it can sure teach us city folks a thing or two.

The performers are three authentic Appalachians and their material is indigenous to the Cumberlands, recorded there by the WPA Writers Project in the 1930s. But the three are also actor-singers with enough charm, plausibility and all-round skill to con us city slickers out of our pants if they took a mind to.

Storytelling is often underappreciated. As in Nehemiah Persoff's "Tales of Sholem Aleichem," also now in town, it's clear that good

storytelling takes skilled acting. This Roadside Theater troupe makes it an art, an art so apparently effortless that no seams show.

Tom Bledsoe is the stringy one with the long red beard and the mischievous eye — bumpkin one minute, genial maniac the next. Ron Short is the softer, slower hayseed, his pacing so sure, voice so soft and wit so dry that you worry you might miss what he says — but you don't, because you hang avidly on whatever he says or does. And Angelyn DeBord adds matriarchal sinew, keeping the men in line and slipping a feminine twinkle into the mix.

They tell eight stories and sing half a dozen songs, strung loosely together like a neighborly evening with Polly Branham Johnson, the woman who told these stories to those folklorists back in the '30s. If

it sounds like an overdose of cute, don't worry — it has plenty of grit, authenticity and a debunking sense of humor. When they tell a tall tale, they let us know that they know that we know that's just what it is, so we all enjoy it together.

The sponsoring organization for this visit to the big city is Calliope House, Pittsburgh's protector of the traditional folk arts, using the stage at the City Theater, out behind the Pitt Law School in Oakland. The opening act last night was folk singer John Benedict, but tonight, tomorrow and Sunday it will be musician Dave Krusty.

### If you're going

"Brother Jack" continues today through Sunday at 8 p.m. and tomorrow and Sunday at 2 p.m. Call 322-6359 (Calliope House) or 624-4101 (City Theater).