

Spellbinders from Appalachia

ONSTAGE, there is a lanky guy with lanky hair, a huge red beard and little brown-berry eyes. He looks mean. There is a dark-haired woman wearing a wash dress. She has a shiny nose and dimples. She looks like she's got a mouth full of molasses. There's a black-bearded guy with an amiable grin and, when he chooses, an accent that is three parts chewing tobacco to one part decipherable English.

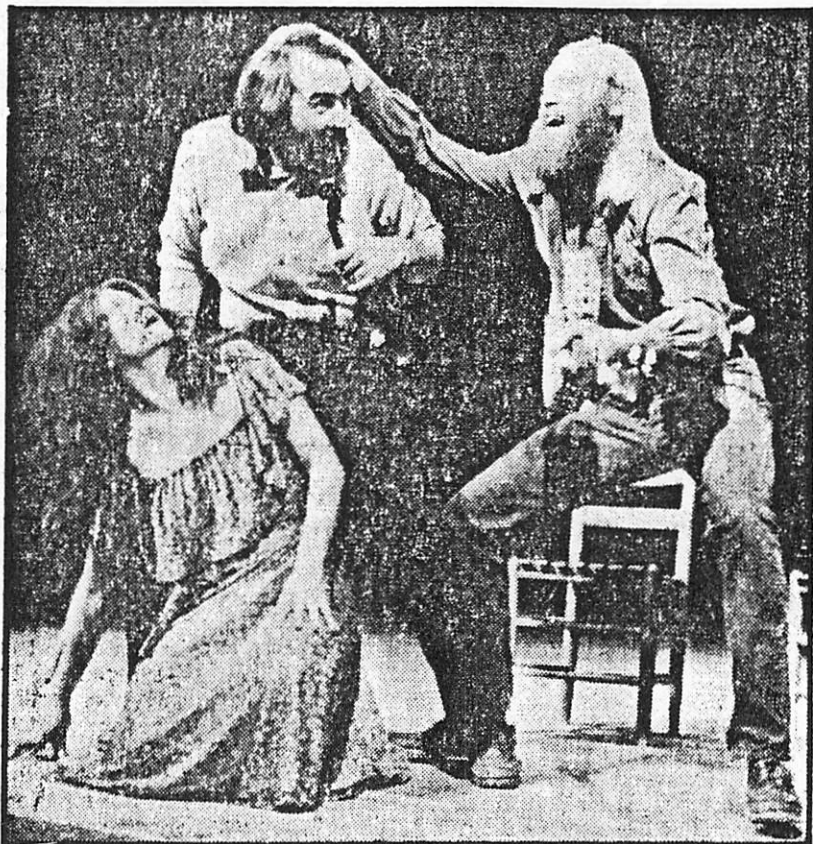
They are Tom Bledsoe, Angelyn DeBord and Ron Short of the Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Ky., and they are in town at the Intersection Theater, presenting music and folk tales of Appalachia as part of the People's Theater Festival — that same festival that brought you John O'Neal as Junebug Jabbo Jones of the Free Southern Theater.

In some ways the Roadside Theater show is kin to O'Neal's show, and in some ways it's not. Their stories ramble interminably from time to time, even as O'Neal rambles. They depend, as he does, on a rich regional sound and powerful theatrical skill to bring their stories alive, and they are, like O'Neal, truly wonderful performers.

The difference, and I mean it as a comment, not a judgment, is that O'Neal's material grew out of the civil rights movement and the Roadside Theater has no specific focus, except perhaps the constant theme of death in the coal mines ("Everybody knows the mines just ain't safe. It ain't right"). Beyond that, the stories are largely innocent of the social and political problems of Appalachia. There's nothing like the fierce folk poetry of the late Aunt Molly Jackson, who lived over in the Ozarks.

What there is instead is foot-stomping mountain comedy and a positively gothic appreciation of gory stories. (There is a tale of a cannibalistic blue-beard and there is a horrid story of a seven-foot "hairy woman" whose baby comes to a ghastly end.) There are "rogues and ruffians and rowdy boys," and until you see Bledsoe scowl and grin like a rowdy boy, you've never met one before.

Underneath it all, there is a haunting sadness — in the stories of death in the mines and death by hanging — and a sense of 19th century isolation from change. There is never laughter at the expense of Appalachia, or condescension. That old time religion offers an



Angelyn DeBord, Ron Short and Tom Bledsoe in 'Brother Jack'

entertaining target (DeBord is superb at sanctimony), but there is also a sense of the strength it brings. Musically, anyway.

When these three performers sing, they sound like 30 people, and the instrumental work is fine (guitar, banjo and fiddle). Only a couple of songs go on long enough to prove Tom Lehrer's thesis that all folk music is endless.

The thing I like best is the living proof that simple story-telling is just as spellbinding as it ever was before we began adding our wits with television.

—Nancy Scott

REVIEW highlights

"Brother Jack," a People's Theater presentation of music and folktales of Appalachia presented by the Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, Ky. With Angelyn DeBord, Ron Short and Tom Bledsoe. Three richly talented artists of Appalachia prove that simple story-telling can be as spellbinding as any blockbuster movie. The stories are sometimes gothic, sometimes poignant; few make reference to the chaotic social, economic and political history of the area. The evening has a great many laughs — and a few slow moments. Through July 11. Wednesday through Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday matinee, 2:30 p.m. Top tickets, \$7. At the Intersection, 756 Union St. Phone 397-6061.

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