

Cruelty and Comedy on the Appalachian Trail

By CHESTER GOOLRICK

Atlanta

Life in the steep hills and dark hollows of Appalachia, where Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee converge in coal-mining country, is an arduous, risky business. Coal miners and moonshiners have always lived hard and died young, sped along, more often than not, by black-lung disease and buckshot.

As made abundantly clear in the latest production by the peripatetic Roadside Theater, a troupe of mostly self-taught actor-storytellers from the Kentucky coalfields, the people of Appalachia are funny, stubborn, mean, bawdy, God-fearing and fatalistic. All these characteristics are embodied in an indigenous 200-year-old oral tradition the actors dramatize.

In two days of performances and workshops here, the seven-year-old company, based in Whitesburg, Ky., showed the wit and wisdom that have earned it a national reputation as an innovative, if financially struggling, regional theater.

"Brother Jack," its latest production, is a melange of Appalachian tales and songs performed in sprightly fashion by two young, bearded men in blue jeans and a woman in a simple country dress who saunter onto a bare stage of a match-box-sized, store-front theater in a transitional neighborhood and cheerfully begin telling stories. Appalachia, with all its comedy and cruelty, comes vividly to life.

The stories, like the mountains, are full of cruel jokes and tragedy: A clever young

woman tricks a killer into confessing. Another woman is married three times and all three husbands die in the mines. A blackguard named Clifton Branham runs off with a woman, commits murder and is hanged in the town square. People drink too much and pray and kill each other with alarming regularity. These stories (the performers tell us that they are all true) define hard-scrabble lives.

Roadside's actors have perfected an improvisatory style that is particularly suited to the stories they have chosen to tell; their conversational tone is chilling. Angie DeBord is particularly moving as Aunt Polly, who in a determined voice tells the long story of Clifton Branham's hanging. The two men, Ron Short and Tommy Bledsoe, play rousing tunes on guitar and banjo, and all three sing in the somber modal harmonies of the mountains.

Since 1974, when Roadside Theater was founded under the aegis of Appalshop, a multi-media rural arts project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations, it has assembled two major productions from the legends of Appalachia. In addition to "Brother Jack," the company offers a full-length play about a turn-of-the-century moonshine war along the Virginia-Kentucky border which won the group wide praise; eventually, it ran at the Manhattan Theater Club in New York. The troupe continues to perform "Red Fox/Second Hanging," and is negotiating to turn it into a television movie.

Roadside Theater's visit to Atlanta was part of a short tour of urban centers of the

South; a day later it stopped off in Birmingham. Both cities have large populations of immigrant workers from Appalachia. In Cabbagetown, a poor white enclave that grew up around cotton mills in Atlanta, the troupe entertained children whose parents and grandparents traveled the mountain backroads.

On a current operating budget of \$121,000, the actors tour for much of the year in a battered van and, during the summer, set up a revival tent for theater in coal towns throughout Appalachia. "A lot of people have never seen theater," says Dudley Cocke, one of the company's writers. "When they see their own stories performed, they love it. One woman said, 'This is better than television!'"

But Roadside Theater is not intended to be merely a vehicle for preserving old stories, says Mr. Cocke. "What's more important is that we record and make new the history and culture of the region so that the cultural threads are not severed, and so a living tradition is maintained."

Although Roadside Theater has survived, it has managed only with considerable help from the National Endowment for the Arts. With President Reagan's proposed budgetary cutbacks, the theater is facing hard times. But in the meantime the Appalachian-bred actors continue to take their foot-stomping, gritty version of rural life to the far-flung corners of America.

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