

# Histrionics and History

Eileen Blumenthal

**Red Fox/Second Hangin'**  
Manhattan Theatre Club  
321 E. 73 St.  
**Moliere In Spite of Himself**  
Colonnades Theatre Lab  
428 Lafayette St.

Storytelling for adults, as a form of entertainment, is rare today. As a means of transmitting history, it has nearly died out. The Roadside Theater, a talented troupe from eastern Kentucky, currently is doing a kind of documentary storytelling which not only is wonderfully engaging but also provides the audience with a rich sense of the history of the Appalachian mountain culture in which the theater is rooted.

*Red Fox/Second Hangin'* tells the true story of the murder conviction in the 1890s in Wise County, Virginia, of honest, cunning, compassionate ex-sheriff Ole Doc

Taylor. It recounts how wealthy Devil John Wright — who never forgave that crafty "Red Fox" Taylor for arresting Wright's crony and hit-man, Bad Taut Hall — engineered the terrible frame-up.

The Roadside's piece, though, is more than a documentary about a crime. It is a portrait of a vibrant culture in a period of deep and disjointed transition. As a backdrop to the frame-up plot, we see a rural mountain society left ravaged and feud-ridden by the Civil War, then exploited and corrupted by rich city folk who discovered the enormous wealth to be had from the region's mineral deposits. Bad Taut Hall started his killings as a side-switching soldier in the Civil War. Devil John Wright made his fortune helping the city folk to bilk the "natives" out of their land. Hangings came into Wise County when the new class of rich people in their "palaces" decided to establish law and order over the unruly locals. Bad Taut Hall

was the first to hang. Red Fox was the second.

The Roadside Theater researched and pieced together the events and background information for *Red Fox* from published histories and newspaper accounts, unpublished documents unearthed in local attics, and stories told by old people in the region. And the company's style of performance comes from the traditional storytelling of the southern Appalachians. The three actors — Don Baker, Gary Slemp, and Frankie Taylor — use no costumes, props, or scenery (apart from a couple of chairs). They narrate and demonstrate the events and personages, sliding easily in and out of character and passing the various roles, including that of narrator, back and forth among them. Through simple changes in voice tone, speech rhythms, and physical bearing, they suggest characters as varied as lying, bitchy frame-up conspirator Sister Jane Mullins, killers Bad Henry Adams and Bad Taut Hall, clever, religious Ole Doc Taylor, a child watching the hangings perched on a tree limb, and "Pap," an old man who recalls the story of Red Fox — and who *was* the child watching from the tree. The actors present their tale with im-



**Red Fox/Second Hangin':**  
Taylor, Slemp and Baker

pressive skill, charm, wit, and love.

Roadside supplements the traditional storytelling style with some simple media aids. The actors perform *Red Fox* in front of projected photographs taken in the region in the 1880s and '90s. At one point, they also show a short filmed reenactment

of the mass murder for which Doc Taylor was convicted (although it does help to give a feel for the culture, the film probably is a mistake; it undermines the documentary feel of the rest of the presentation). And tapes of local music are played before the performance begins and during the intermission.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the Roadside Theater is the very

special relationship that the actors have with their material and generate with their audience. Baker, Slemp, and Taylor are sharing not only their talents but also their love, and their performance has the quality of a personal gift. Watching *Red Fox*, one returns to the wide-eyed state of a child hearing a new story — anxious, on one hand, to learn the ending, but not wanting the experience of hearing the story to end. The performance provides, too, that very special pleasure of learning. One leaves feeling just a little bit broader in knowledge and understanding than when one came in.

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