

The Face Of Mountain Life

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Ten minutes into "South of the Mountain," the audience listened intently as an Appalachian mother told of her son Eb's fits. "Wasn't anythin' you could do," said the aproned mother in her flat, mountain way. "I doctored him best I could."

They chuckled over brother Thad's encounter with an old man who pulled teeth with a set of wire pliers.

And they seemed delighted with perhaps the world's only song devoted entirely to the joys of good mountain eatin': an ode to Mama's fried chicken, corn bread, biscuits 'n gravy, fried taters.

Through a whole string of such stories and songs telling of small incidents — the stuff of lazy Sunday afternoons on the front porch — a larger story of change in Appalachia was told.

"This is a story about families like you-all," announced player Ron Short at the play's start. It was a large claim. But the banjo and fiddle strewn about the stage as in a living-room, and the natural way actors launched into stories — "like breathing," an audience member said — was an unspoken invitation to pull up an old rocker and sit a spell, too.

Two generations of a mountain family were conjured up by three actors, voices going from young and firm to shaky, legs stiffening that had moments earlier stamped and high-stepped like a pony's.

Their lives became a mirror held up to a changing Appalachia. Like it, they passed from a life of farming — "We had

nothin' but we had plenty," a self-sustaining existence of "plenty of work but no jobs" — to seduction by the cities into a thirst for money and things, to the coal camps, and finally to a life "far from the mountains."

Time works differently on each character. "I'm leavin' these mountains so far behind," sings the brother who curses the day he first descended into the mines, but is torn apart by leaving. "But I'm out of patience and about out of time...And my heart's runnin' on empty."

His mother stays on the farm until her death. She never strays from her set of harsh, purifying beliefs in hard work and that "there's nothin' more precious than the land."

Eb, who never married, remains on the farm with her. But they have long since stopped raising crops and he spends his days reading in the hayloft. He is "kinda stuck in the middle" between the old ways and the new. "But leastways, I know where I'm at," he tells the audience from behind his ginger beard.

The stories tumble out, putting flesh on the bones of history. The grimness of coal-mining, performed in the shadow of death, is brought home through stories of a shirt frozen to the body, the roof collapsing and of "dust control."

"Dust control?" mocks the young, dark-haired coal miner. "We ate the dust — that was dust control."

But meanwhile, his wife, blond hair aglow, tells in unsentimental fashion how cash has improved things. The new

refrigerator, for example, changed her life. "I loved that ice-water." And she rhapsodizes about cake mixes. "They tasted better than the ones you made yourself."

The old ways were dying, but people couldn't dig the graves fast enough.

But despite the hard times portrayed, the play was a celebration of Appalachia — its food, fleet-footed dance, its fiddling, straight-faced humor and the habit its people have of taking what life dishes out with pride and dignity.

After joining in a final chorus with the three players, the audience that packed Roby Center's Little Theater gave the group an enthusiastic ovation.

They were perhaps acknowledging the truthfulness of the play's story. Not only did it have the ring of truth, it was true, based largely on reminiscences of the author's kin. He, as all the performers, was raised in the rural, mountainous region of eastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia.

The play was a production of Roadside Theater, a touring company that is one of the five branches of Appalshop. That is an arts and educational organization whose purpose is to "document the history and culture of Appalachia and to provide a forum through which Appalachian people can show the world as they see it."

It was performed by Ron Short, who also wrote the script and songs, Nancy Jeffrey and Tom Bledsoe. The free performance was sponsored by The Greenville Sun as part of the Bicentennial celebration.

