



STAGE REVIEW

KENTUCKY COMES TO L.A. IN 'MOUNTAIN'

By DAN SULLIVAN,
Times Theater Critic

One criticism of American regional theater is that it isn't regional enough: that if you put a blindfold on an audience, it couldn't tell whether it was hearing a show at the Mark Taper Forum or the Long Wharf in New Haven.

This was not a problem Thursday night at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. The show, "South of the Mountain," started with a bearded man taking the stage and announcing that he'd "talk a little while first, so that you can get used to it. Because sometimes it takes time to get used to the way we talk."

The way we talk—not just the accent, but the syntax. See how the last phrase doubles back, like a snake slipping into its hole. With strangers, you don't come out with everything all at once.

Roadside Theatre is from Whitesburg, Ky. Coal country. People there never did have much money, certainly not in the Depression. They did try to stick together and keep their dignity. Eventually life got better, if an electric stove in the house is better than a wood one—obviously it's faster. But something got lost on the way.

These are the general concerns of "South of the Mountain." It has three performers: Ron Short (the man mentioned above, who also



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Nancy Jeffrey sings in "South of the Mountain" at LATC.

wrote the piece), Nancy Jeffrey and Tom Bledsoe. The men play instruments—fiddle, guitar, banjo—and everybody sings, especially Jeffrey.

It is not any kind of hoedown. Drawn from "reflections of the author's kin," its humor is gentle and its prevalent mood melancholy. Nature hasn't been too kind to these folks (Bledsoe plays an epileptic who never married) and neither has the coal company. It made a big thing about bringing power to the region, but the miners still had to use hand-drills.

The family (we meet a new generation in the second act) knows how to enjoy itself, but the enjoyment always seems tied to the

past—retelling the old stories, wishing that things today were as simple as they seemed when we were kids.

The viewer admires these people and enjoys their company—they certainly do their best to make you feel at home. Still, the listener, at least this one, isn't quite at home. The point of certain stories is so gentle that it hardly seems a point at all, and one doesn't know what to do with the feeling of futility aroused elsewhere.

The reserved quality of the piece is both true to the region and a drawback for viewers who aren't from the region. The material doesn't chime in with experiences that we've had, making it unnecessary to fill in the blanks. We do need them filled in.

Short's songs are beautifully performed, especially when the instruments get put away and the three voices find the extra purity of a cappella singing. Short's lyrics are not, unfortunately, much different from mainstream folk-pop stuff. The sharpness of local speech gets homogenized in clichés about self-realization and romantic love.

But there's no problem understanding where "South of the Mountain" comes from, and no doubt about the comfort it must bring the listener who can match every one of its memories with something that happened in his or her own family.

Final performances are at 2 and 8 p.m. today, 514 S. Spring St. Tickets, \$13-\$23. (213) 622-3771.