

Roadside Theater Brings Audience to Their Feet

By Frances Hallam Hurt

The girls surged to their feet, stomped and yelled as the performance ended.

Was it Michael Jackson? Was it break dancing? Was it Matt Dillon?

Oddly enough, it was merely three quiet figures in worn clothes standing on a wooden platform in the auditorium at Chatham Hall last Thursday night. They were mountain people from the coal country of the Appalachians, come to tell their story and sing their songs in the legendary manner of the mountains. They are part of Roadside Theater, the goal of which is to keep the ancient mountain history and culture from dying.

That they should so touch the young students, whose own culture is given to the thudding of rock music and the adrenelin rush of hyped drama, is a mark of their skill. Their performance of "South of the Mountain," written by one of the performers, Ron Short, has been equally received across the country, including the jaded audiences of Off-Broadway where Roadside has played for the last two years.

This tour will end at Wolftrap, the national center for the performing arts outside of Washington. Among

performing artists, this is a signal recognition of class. They performed at the Wednesday Club in Danville prior to Chatham Hall.

The story of "South of the Mountain" is a real one -- that of Ron Short's family, typical of the mountains. Their hard but loving lives are pictured in the first act, with Nancy Bledsoe playing the men's strong mother, holding to the work ethic to provide the essentials -- all a family needs if they're together. "It's not what you got. It's what you're satisfied with," she says.

Nancy Bledsoe becomes an old mountain woman without a trace of make-up. She simply changes her dress and lets down her hair for the second act to become a young girl.

"I've sung for years," she said, "but I had never acted until Roadside. I studied very hard with them for a year and a half to learn to be what I'm playing." Is she ever.

As her sons, Short and Bledsoe are funny and endearing, with some neat choreographed interaction. They are ace musicians with wonderful mountain music written by Short, stopping the show. Short plays the fiddle and guitar, while Bledsoe plays the banjo and har-

monica. Bledsoe also plays with the Carter Family where Ed George, now of Chatham, remembered filming him when he saw him

again at Chatham Hall. The three performers sing silkily well together, and some of their songs are available on recordings and tape.

The second half of the play is the dark side of the mountain -- the depression and the abandoning of the precious land to work in the coal mines. Things were never the same. For this isolated family, the WPA and the CCC Camps were windows on the great world -- a view not recognized by most.

To achieve its usual bond with its audience, the players threw up a platform in front of the stage in order to be close, to make its story a personal experience for everybody. A number of townspeople were among the 200 who attended. Chatham Hall had invited the public to attend free.

These hillbillies, as they call themselves, have come a long way from "Aw, shucks!" They're more like "WHO-EEEE!" Traditional Appalachia will be around for a long time yet.

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