

ROADSIDE THEATER

Down-Home Tales In 'Mountain'

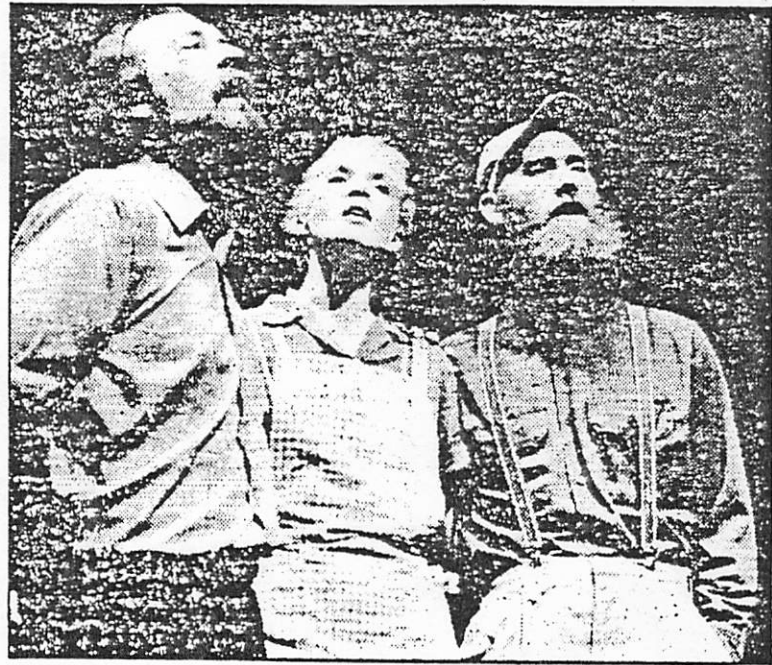
Peter Stack
Chronicle Staff Critic

In a supercharged age such as ours, it's refreshing to find something like the Roadside Theater, in sold-out performances this week at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, performing "South of the Mountain." The piece is fine, engrossing, intimate theater in the so-called hillbilly tradition of storytelling and song.

It's too bad everything's so formal at big old Zellerbach, which never becomes the kind of back-porch atmosphere needed to really sit back in a corn-whiskey-sippin' way, and let the enthralling sense of Appalachia wash over you. Roadside is playing to a capacity audience of 190 in Zellerbach's OnStage space, which is literally the stage turned into a theater at the cavern-

ous UC Berkeley hall. If you're in the audience, the empty seats of the whole auditorium loom like shale in a dark ravine, and, for me, it was not a warming element for work as tender and personal as Roadside's tales and songs about a dirt-poor family in southwestern Virginia.

Roadside Theater is one of the nation's celebrated folk performance groups devoted to keeping alive — and vividly so — the history, lore, humor and music of the rich, often downtrodden, mountain culture of Appalachian farms and coal fields in southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky. The group, which is based in the Appalachian region about which it sings, tours nationally thanks to support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The last visit to the Bay Area



Ron Short, Nancy Jeffray and Tommy Bledsoe in 'South of the Mountain,' at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall

was in 1983 at San Francisco's Intersection.

"South of the Mountain" has three performers — Ron Short (who wrote the material), Nancy Jeffray and Tommy Bledsoe. They tell the

story of two generations of an Appalachian family, from roughly the turn of the century to the '50s, by adopting their personae. The folks dress in the cloddish, workaday fashions of their characters, and, of course, speak in twangy backwoods idioms. But they are polished, accomplished actors and musicians, and their characterizations are alive to every nuance of life.

The staging is stark — the only props are chairs — and the instruments used are guitar, banjo, fiddle and harmonica. In the amusing and yet poignant "South of the Mountain," we meet the original Ma and Pa types whose spirits prevail against the hardships of poverty and begrudging farmlands, and, later, their offspring who are clobbered by worsening economic conditions and forced to become indentured to greedy mining operations in the coal fields.

A little less talk and a lot more song would be a help to the program, partly because the singing is so good, so packed with the images and emotions of a culture that, in spite of strife and not a little derision, emerges as one in celebration of human kinship. If you are interested in Americana, keep an eye out for this exceptional group from Appalachia, which I hope will return to the Bay Area sometime.

CAL POLY THEATRE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1988

at 7 PM

\$14 & 10 Public — \$10 & 6 Students

Call 756-1421 for reservations

This performance is sponsored by Cal Poly Arts, and, in part, with funds provided by the WESTERN STATES ARTS FEDERATION, the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and L. J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation.