



San Francisco Examiner

OCTOBER 19, 1988

Musicians sing of life in the hills

By Robert Hurwitt
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

NO, YOU CAN'T go home again — not even in as down-home an entertainment as the Roadside Theater's rustic musical memento "South of the Mountain." The land itself may be, as one character sings, "as much a part of life as breathin'," but — for those who stayed on it, as much as for those who left seeking work — after awhile there's simply "no there there" anymore.

"South of the Mountain," last seen here in 1983 in one of Roadside's all too infrequent Bay Area visits, opened Tuesday for a brief, three-day run (closing Thursday) at UC-Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall. It's being presented in Cal Performances' most intimate space — OnStage Zellerbach, with the audience seated on the stage — which works well for the low-key production.

This is essentially the same

"South of the Mountain" that Roadside presented here five years ago, with the same three engaging performers: lean, red-bearded Tommy Bledsoe, stocky author/songwriter Ron Short, and the almost ethereal Nancy Jeffrey.

Like all Roadside pieces, "Mountain" is an exploration of life in the Appalachian coal mining region of western Virginia and eastern Kentucky, drawn from the area's stories and musical lore. (Roadside is part of Appalshop, a multimedia arts organization founded in 1969 as part of the War on Poverty.)

In this case, the story is that of two generations of a mountain family, based on Short's own family's history, interwoven with about a dozen sadly reflective and joyously foot-stomping songs — also by Short, who accompanies himself and the other performers on fiddle and guitar (with Bledsoe on banjo and harmonica).

It's a story that breaks down into two parts, each about an hour in length. The first act looks at the first generation, with Jeffrey as Ma, an old maid of 21 who surprises her family and herself by getting married and settling down to farm a few acres with her husband Henry. Bledsoe is Everett, the oldest of her several sons; Short portrays Thad, her youngest.

THEATER REVIEW

'South of the Mountain'

Playwright: Ron Short

Directors: Dudley Cocke, Short

Cast: Tommy Bledsoe, Nancy Jeffrey, Short

Theater: Roadside Theater at OnStage Zellerbach, Berkeley, through Oct. 20 (642-9988)

At first it looks deceptively like this is going to be a back-to-the-land celebration of rustic values, with an opening a cappella number (in beautifully melded three-part harmony) decrying urban evils ("you can lose your very soul," the singers proclaim, "living in cities of gold").

But Short is after subtler, more complex dramatic ore. Quietly, persistently, ribbing each other with the gentle familiarity of a close-knit family, the three actors relate their tales of the hardships of hard-scrabble mountain farming. By the end of the first act, we can already see the end of a way of life.

Modernization and a money-based economy are moving in on a life based on trading food and cooperative labor; corn-based agriculture has pretty much depleted the land, and there are few forests left to clear for more acreage. Even as

Jeffrey sings "When I'm gone, the land will still be here to raise and feed another family," Everett and Thad are arguing the merits of living on the land vs. getting out and earning some money.

The second act follows the separate paths of the two brothers, focusing mostly on Thad's life as a coal miner — the only work available in the area — with Jeffrey startlingly transformed from the worn, wiry Ma into Thad's girlish, optimistic 15-year-old bride Mabel. By subtle degrees, we see them worn down by the hardships of the mine and the temptations of the company store.

It's a sad and deeply affecting tale, made all the more effective by the sweet, melodious music and ingratiating performances of the Roadside troupe. Nor is it a story that holds out false hope in the virtues of the good old ways; Everett, who stayed on the land, is left at loose ends, earning his subsistence by not farming.

But as pessimistic as its story could be, Roadside's "South of the Mountain" is also uplifting. The characters may not have found any way out of their dilemma, but the humor, the music and the genuine warmth of the presentation embody human hope.