

## A Delightful Trip to Appalachia

BY BERNARD WEINER

There are all sorts of things to be gained from experimental theater, but its tendency to turn humans into little more than visual props sometimes puts off viewers.

That's why this year's People's Theater Festival is so important. Under the rubric of "Story, Song and Theater," it is concentrating on ordinary people and the folk wisdom to be found both in The Word and music.

Each of the four troupes on view (as well as storytellers Jo Carson, David Barrett, John Molloy) adds to that emphasis: the Provisional Theater's "Junebug Jabbo Jones"; El Teatro Campesino's "Corridos"; Traveling Jewish Theater's "Coming From a Great Distance" and "A Dance of Exile"; Roadside Theater's "South of the Mountain."

I first caught the Kentucky troupe, Roadside, at a theater critics' convention in Nashville several years ago, performing a deceptively simple show called "Red Fox/Second Hangin'."

It was the weekend's highlight, and one of the best shows I'd seen in years. No high tech. No razzle-dazzle. Just a few actors telling true and embellished tales about two feuding mountain families, leavened with down-home music.

The show, which may be seen on national TV in the near future, made me feel I'd been in the company of some talented, warm-hearted entertainers, while I was getting an education into mountain ways that no amount of book-larnin' could ever teach me.

Roadside's current show, "South of the Mountain," which



**SOUTH OF THE MOUNTAIN:** A storytelling play, with music, by Kentucky's Roadside Theater. (Through May 15. Intersection, 756 Union Street.)

opened last night at Intersection, is not quite that good, but it filled me with much the same feelings. It's wonderfully entertaining, and should not be missed by anyone who cares about good stories, people-oriented theater and fine C&W and mountain music.

Ron Short wrote the play, based on two generations in his own Appalachian family.

We follow their fascinating stories — often delightfully humorous, sometimes touchingly moving — from the subsistence farming in the 1920s to the first time a car entered the "sled roads" of the mountains, from the grinding poverty in the Great Depression to the tyranny of the "company store" in the coal fields once work opened up there.

Through the stories they tell and the songs they sing, the three performers — Short, Tom Bledsoe and Nancy Jeffrey — expertly take us into those isolated mountain "hollers" and coal fields.

Short is responsible for the music as well, and these songs — backed by guitar, banjo, harmonica, fiddle — are wonderfully rich evocations of period, mood, personality. They range from foot-stompin' mountain tunes to plaintive ballads, and are sung superbly by the three talented performers. Indeed, the music alone is worth the price of a ticket.

Even with the constant humor running through the play, the script bathes a bit too much in the harsh realities of life "south of the mountain," and ends somewhat abruptly. A bit more work on possible solutions to these people's dilemma would seem to be in order.