

THEATER:

Villager

There's Pure Gold in South of 'South of the Mountain'

BY VALERIE DAVISON

Is there gold in the Appalachian mountains? "Nah," you say, too quickly. "If there were, those people'd be rich."

Well, they are. Or at least three of them are, and if you don't believe it, just take yourself down to Dance Theatre Workshop on West 19th Street and let them prove it to you. The kind of riches to be found in "South of the Mountain" can't be mined with a pick axe, and the wealth displayed by its three performers is one of talent and soul.

"South of the Mountain" is not a play in the conventional sense. It is an evening of story-telling and music, the flavor of both being authentic hill-country. The format features three figures. In the first act it is an aged mother and two of her eight children, the eldest and the youngest. In the second act, you have the same sons, with the woman now assuming the role of the younger man's wife. The narrative traces their lives from the early Thirties, through the New Deal programs, and finally to the coal mines where the youngest finally goes when the land is no longer even barely enough.

Featuring guitar, fiddle and banjo, the story line is punctuated by periodic songs, 12 in all, written by one of the performers, Ron Short, who also wrote the script. The music is melodic and haunting, and the lyrics are so good they could stand by themselves as poetry. This is a very talented man, whose work smacks of the best of such bywords as Rod McKuen and Bob Dylan, but is unmistakably his own.

If you think you don't like hill country music, and think there is something inherently untheatrical about "telling stories," you'd be advised to put your reservations aside and take a chance on this one. The music is much more sophisticated than the square dance, nasal-toned hoe-down type we think of here as hill country, and the script is eminently theatrical in the best sense of the term. This is a thoughtful and humorous show, playful, profound and infinitely touching. The themes are universal—poverty, survival, love, and, of course, the quest for home.



From left: Ron Short, Tommy Bledsoe and Nancy Jeffrey in the original production of "South of the Mountain." (Susie Baker Photo)

It is also important to point out that what you see here is what you get. These are not three actors doing skillful imitations. These three people—Tom Bledsoe, Nancy Jeffrey and Ron Short—were born reared and live in the region they're telling about. The accents are not assumed,

nor the postures, nor the homely dignity and unobtrusive pride with which they carry themselves. There is an intriguing and admirable solidity about this trio that you seldom see on a New York stage. A sense of who they are, what they are, and what they want to be. And that, my friend,

can't be bought for all the gold in anybody's hills.

SOUTH OF THE MOUNTAIN, by Ron Short; at Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, thru Sept. 25