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Frontier Yarn-Spinning Intrigues City Slickers

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Central Appalachia seems an unlikely launching pad for a show that played off-Broadway and garnered good reviews in the national press.

But a group of actors and a writer who live in Wise County in Virginia and ply their art as the Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Ky., recently played the toughest theater town in the world and came out shining.

The play the group took to New York is an original production written by Don Baker and Dudley Cocke, former classmates at Washington and Lee University and members of the troupe. It's called "Red Fox/Second Hanging" and it's based on the activities of Doc Taylor, a "semi-legendary" figure in Wise County in the second half of the 19th century.

After the drama played Washington, the New York Times said it was "as stirring to the audience for its historical detective works as for the art of frontier yarn spinning."

The New Yorker magazine said the story was told with "talent and charm."

The Associated Press called it "touching, often humorous, and theatrically meritorious."

And the Christian Science Monitor called it "remarkable entertainment."

The irony of the big-city success of the play is that it was never intended for a city-slicker audience.

"We set out to do theater in the mountains that made sense in the mountains," Cocke said in a telephone interview.

"We were trying to find a way to have popular theater that would appeal to people regardless of education or age. The type of theater we do is popular in the back 'hollers' and coal camps."

Cocke said that he and Baker talked to people who knew some of the principles in the story while researching it and many of the people in the region are familiar with the play's background.

"Down here, it's just judged differently," he said. "Some old-timers come to see if we get the story right. Some talk back to us. The people around here seem to take an interest in it because other people take the time to do something that concerns them," said the writer who was at W&L from 1964 to 1968.

"Our whole style and content comes from the mountains."

Roadside Theater doesn't have a regular theater to perform in. It produces its shows in school houses and community centers and "whatever's available," Cocke said. And the format of "Red Fox/Second Hanging" is not one of traditional theater.

Some of it is done through story telling with old photos as back-drops. There are no costumes or props. The three actors pass the characters and narration back and forth.

It's a format that allows the show great flexibility, Cocke said, adding that the story-telling format has its roots in mountain tradition.

The theater troupe is a wing of Appalshop, a "multimedia cooperative" supported by federal, state, foundation and private funding.

Cocke said much of the support for Roadside Theater comes from the National Endowment for the Arts and through performance fees. Because of the unique format of the play, various agencies that support theater were reluctant to help fund the Roadside project.

But the New York success is beginning to change all of

that, Cocke said. "It opened up the eyes of a whole segment that wasn't there before."

"It's a whole set of different criteria now. At the time we were developing (the play) we were strapped and didn't have the support."

Cocke said he believes state, local and federal agencies that support the arts need to be more responsive to "grass roots theater," theater that preserves and portrays the heritage of localities throughout the country.

"It really didn't receive recognition among colleges and art commissions," Cocke said.

"The people who were used to traditional theater prejudged it. We really could have used support. We had to prove ourselves outside of the rural communities."

"Red Fox/Second Hanging" came to the attention of persons in contact with the Manhattan Theater Club while the play was part of an experimental drama program.

The result was a month's run at the off-Broadway theater.

Besides Cocke, who's from Virginia Beach, Roadside Theater is comprised of three Wise County men, Frankie Taylor, Gary Slemp and co-author Baker. Slemp, Taylor and Baker are the actors and Cocke is the general manager.

Research for "Red Fox/Second Hanging" was done in court record rooms, newspaper morgues and on the front porches of those who remember the central characters or stories about them. The story that was passed down in the oral tradition is the most accurate, Cocke believes. "People check the accuracy of each other."

But "old copies of The Roanoke Times were some of our sources," said the writer. "The old Lynchburg paper was the most help."

Roadside Theater will continue to bring Appalachian drama to the people of the region and to those who've migrated to larger cities but still feel ties to the mountains and back hollows, Cocke said.

The group considers cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Dayton, where they've played, as 'urban Appalachia.' "There's a large Appalachian migration there," Cocke said.

And in keeping with the region that the troupe calls home, Cocke said a future project might be based on the beginnings of the United Mine Workers. Whatever the material, Cocke claims that the group will keep its bare-bones format so that it can play in a tent or school or off the back of a flatbed truck.

"We'll never get so fancy that we can't do that."

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