

Far Too Many Misconceptions about Theater in America

By Ben Cameron

There are far too many misconceptions about theater in America these days. That it exists only in the major cities in our country (and that it really exists only in New York, with a few others sprinkled around for good measure). That it has to be enormously expensive to attend. That it values only work that either is encrusted with dust from sitting on library shelves or is far too outrageous and weird for most people to appreciate. That theater is a frill, unconnected to important issues in people's lives and can easily be discarded. And that the people who attend are always white, elderly, and wealthy.

These are perceptions that I encounter with the press, with audience members and even with my own students who are considering theater as a profession. In all of these cases, the single most powerful argument I make—and the one that both astounds and inspires them all—is Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Roadside first came to my attention during my years at the Theater Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. It was a time in which panels would review close to 500 applications from theaters all across the country. Few inspired the kind of unanimous enthusiasm that Roadside inevitably inspired on all levels—a reputation that has only enriched itself with time.

Roadside continues to set new standards for many in our field with work that throbs with conviction, that often tickles the spirit while melting the heart, that delights the ear and soothes the soul. The quality of the leadership—the always inspiring Dudley Cocke, whose constant championing of true diversity, economic diversity as well as racial and cultural—is leading other theatres around the country to re-appraise their own work and their values. The innovative vision that connects Kentucky to communities far beyond its own purview has led to exchanges with coal mining communities in Wales and, in one of the most famous and admired series of exchanges in the American landscape, with African American artists from Louisiana, Zuni artists from New Mexico, and Latino artists from the Bronx. In a time when cultural isolationism is far too common, Roadside defies barriers of race and place to posit a richer vision of what being an American can mean.

Ben Cameron has served most recently as the Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group, Program Director for the Arts at The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and is currently the President of the Jerome Foundation.