



CHOTEAU

ACANTHA

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Hometown proud
Plays send message of family, community worth

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From the coal mines of Appalachia to the cattle ranches of the Rocky Mountain Front, the stories of families and communities tell us who we are and tell others what we value.

The twin plays presented in Choteau last weekend drove home that message in a differently, but equally touching and enjoyable manner.

The plays, the product of nearly two years of work by the Performing Arts League and Prairie Mountain Players in Choteau and by Roadside Theater in Kentucky and Virginia, are built around the stories that are the very fabric of each community.

Playing both Saturday and Sunday to a full house in the Choteau Pavilion, the actors and singers in both theater troupes shared their music, their memories and their messages with an appreciative audience.

Last weekend was Choteau's turn to host the members of Roadside Theater and the Mullins Family Singers as they performed their play for folks here. In March, the Choteau group traveled to Kentucky and Virginia and brought the "big mountains" to Appalachia. Their "story-telling exchange" was funded through a National Endowment for the Arts grant.

"The New Ground Revival," the Roadside Theater production featured four members of the Mullins family of Clintwood, Va., a group of singers whose voices blended in a clear, beautiful acapella harmony, as well as two singers and musicians from Roadside Theater.

Accompanied variously by guitar, banjer (banjo) and accordion, the five singers told a story of hope, of poverty, of mother nature, of coal mining, of exploitation, of triumph, of war and of change. Woven through the performance was repeated renditions of Amazing Grace.

With cadence of the mountains of Appalachia sounding in every word they spoke or sang, the Roadside theater group spoke of the need to heed the stories of grandfathers and grandmothers, and to hand those stories down from generation to generation.

The members of the Choteau play not only heeded those stories, under the skillful writing of Sue Facklam and Myrna Paulus, they spun those stories into the narrative of a play epitomizing a typical Choteau family Fourth of July get-together. With all the hustle and bustle of the holiday, with the patriotism, the over-indulgence in spirits, the dancing and the rodeoing, the play tells the story of one of the town's busiest weeks.

It also, however, sent a message to the community: our strength lies in our diversity. Like the fictitious Garreth family, Choteau as a community can accommodate many individuals with different beliefs and opinions who are united by their sense of community and their desire to live here.

The Choteau production was dedicated to Mabel and the late Shorty Crane, who hosted the first story-gathering session in 1993 and supported the project in many ways through the years.