

Dudley Cocke

Roadside Theater

Why don't you start by telling me a little about Roadside?

Roadside Theater is the professional theatre wing of a larger organization called Appalshop, a part of Appalachian Workshop. Appalshop began in 1969 as a War on Poverty program to provide a head start for Appalachian youth in film training. The federal Office of Economic Opportunity set up a dozen such programs around the country with the rationale that the training would enable young people to escape their impoverished communities. Appalshop was the only rural and white program. The others were in the inner city, the so-called "ghetto," so Appalshop's orientation, from the beginning, was around communities of color that were likewise disadvantaged economically.

As I said, Roadside is Appalshop's theatre wing, and there is also a documentary film production and distribution division, a radio station, and a record company. We continue to train young people to become community leaders and citizen-artists. We occasionally publish and work in still photography. We have a major archive project.

All of this work begins with the Appalachian voice – with the impulse to understand the life of our region, of our place. Like the message coming from the 1960s black southern civil rights movement, we, too, were ready to proclaim, "We are somebody" -- and we are definitely not the stereotype you think we are.

Within the reality of Central Appalachia, there was always this idea that part of what Appalshop needed to do was to tell the Appalachian story from the inside out. The Appalachian story had been told to the nation by lots of other people. But not by people from Appalachia. It was within that exciting context that Roadside Theater was formed in 1975-'76.

This idea of projecting from the inside out: is the goal, then, to create local work that is distributed beyond the Appalachian community? Or to create work locally for locals, so they can see their own stories on stage?

Both. Roadside makes theatre that is, in the stock phrase, "of, by, and for"

The soul of
Roadside's plays
just shrivels up
without a diverse
audience.

Appalachian people, with the idea that by telling our particular story with skill and care, that story can appeal to people anywhere. And that turned out to be the case. Our work begins here, but it travels around the United States and occasionally overseas.

From the beginning, our relationship with our audience and our local culture has shaped the form and content of our plays and how we produce and perform them. For example, our work has no fourth wall. We speak directly to the audience, and the audience is invited to speak back. And that isn't just some imposed, formal convention; it's part of the culture here. And it's part of the culture in many communities – for example in southern black churches, where we've often performed.

What happens when you take a piece of yours to Europe that is designed that way? Does it change the interaction that you seek to have with the audience and that you actually have with the audience?

Getting diversity in the audience is a key thing when we take the work outside of our own rural, working class culture. That's been an issue when we tour in the U.S., and it's also an issue when the work has gone to Europe. Professional, nonprofit theatre in the United States is largely viewed by well-educated, economically well-off people. Since our work comes out of a working class culture, of course, we want to reach that working class audience whether we're in Europe or whether we're in Nebraska. And that's taken a lot of effort, because it's not the usual audience that one finds as a touring theatre. Getting this more diverse audience to attend when you're sponsored by an arts presenter or a university performing arts series requires a lot of strategy.

Let me make an analogy to give you an idea of what I think is at stake artistically. Shakespeare wrote for the gallery and the pit. Can you imagine what happens to the actors playing the low parts when everyone in the audience is rich and powerful? I witnessed that watching the Royal Shakespeare Company perform *As You Like It* in San Francisco for an audience that had paid \$140 a ticket. Those poor actors with the low parts just died right there before me – nothing they said or did could elicit a response. I thought they might fail to reappear after intermission! Likewise, the soul of Roadside's plays just shrivels up

without a diverse audience. And the irony is that the shriveled, disfigured version may actually be popular with the wealthy audience -- but it's not the play Roadside wrote.

In the late '80s, with support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, we, along with a bunch of other theatres, tracked our audiences over six years. The findings for us were almost the exact inverse of the rest of the theatres being tracked in the sample -- for example, 73% of our audience earned less than \$50,000 a year and 30% of those earned \$20,000 or less annually.

Our audience diversity success derives in part from our artistic understanding that the audience is part of the show. Often it seems like our plays occur in some third, ephemeral space, which is neither where the audience is seated, nor is it on the stage where the actors are playing. Remember, there is no fourth wall, and we prefer non-proscenium spaces. This intimacy and the opportunity for spontaneous call and response between the audience and actors can cause what I can only describe as a levitating effect. It's probably akin to what athletes describe as "being in the zone," but in the theatre of participation, everyone can go there together -- and without losing their individuality.

In your play creation process, what does "audience input" look like to you?

The two main heritages here are Scotch Irish and Cherokee, and both are narrative-based cultures—so we're a narrative-based theatre. After showing a work in progress, we like to hear more stories from the audience about the story the play is trying to tell. We have a particular storytelling methodology—it's a formal story circle method—that we use. It provides a form, and forum, for audience members to tell their personal stories about the themes in the performance in which they have just participated as audience members. Parts of some of their stories eventually may be incorporated into the play. This process is repeated as the play develops, with the goal of deepening and bringing more nuances to the story we are telling. In that way, the play develops from these deepening iterative stories that the audience is telling around the themes.

We do the same thing when we take a finished play to a new community. Say

Our audience diversity success derives in part from our artistic understanding that the audience is part of the show.

To see your own story on the stage for the first time is shocking, and can be a life-changing experience.

we put on a play about that moment here in the coalfields when people made the change from a small subsistence farm economy to an industrial economy. That's a theme that you can find in places around the world. After the play, rather than having a talk-back with the audience, in which someone says, "Well, why did the actor or director make this choice?" or "I like this better than that" or "I didn't understand this"—rather than that, we go into story circles

with the audience to hear their personal stories called up by the performance. As a bonus, these new stories help the actors develop their roles.

When one of our plays is successful, it takes you into different places, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, and with that experience, the stories that then come out in the audience circle are very, very rich. At such moments they – the audience – realize their own potential as artists and as shapers of narratives. And that idea of animating and empowering the community voice is why Roadside and Appalshop got started in the first place.

So, this connection with the audience is part of the DNA of Roadside Theater. The people who are in the plays all came up in this culture. They're not actors who've trained at some academy somewhere else. In the main, they've received their training as folk artists—they're trained by the community as storytellers, as singers, as musicians.

We've been asked, at different times, what's given you the fortitude to continue as an ensemble for thirty-odd years? And my answer has always been that we've endured because we place the audience at the center of our work. That's been the secret ingredient. When we travel around the country, we often run into audience members who have Appalachian roots, but there's been so much stigma around working class and poor "hillbilly" culture that they may feel ashamed of their background. They arrive at the play incognito, and then when they see something of beauty and truth on the stage that reflects them, the pride that swells up is huge. To see your own story on the stage for the first time is shocking, and can be a life-changing experience.

As we've gone around the country, we've encountered many, many people

who've had that experience while being part of one of our plays. It's emotional, and they now want to reveal themselves by sharing their own stories -- and then just stand beside the actors in this circle of new-found intimacy. That's one very good reason that when our plays end, and after bows are taken, we have no curtain.

Several years after we got started, there was a moment when I knew that Roadside was succeeding. Out of the blue, we got a call from a woman asking us to please come and sing several of the songs from one of our plays at her dad's funeral. Then we knew our theatre had become part of the community's daily life.

With such connection to the community, how do you make decisions about programming? Do you start with the topic and then go solicit the stories? And is there something particular that you're looking for as a reaction to those stories when you first start?

We've approached the making of our plays in many different ways. We don't have a formula. In fact, we think of ourselves as an experimental theatre. For example, we made a series of plays, in the early days, which retold Appalachian history from the people's point of view. Starting in the 1890s, at the end of the Appalachian frontier period, the official history of this region started being written by absentee corporations. So you have this official written history and a parallel people's history -- a classic counter narrative. And so we did a series of plays over a dozen years that retold the history from this people's oral history. For those plays, we worked a lot with community stories. We collected oral histories and pored through recordings and transcripts from the local WPA Oral History Project.

One of those early plays is *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*. It's about the coming of the industrialists to the mountains and the two hangings that result from their new coalfield law and order. We set out to test which of the two radically different versions of this important story was more accurate: the written history or the people's oral history.

We collected a lot of oral histories. We got up into the old courthouse, found the actual courthouse records of the two trials that led to the two hangings. Got into the newspaper morgues in the different states. Crafted a play, and started performing it around here.

In the warmer months, we would pitch a revival tent up the hollers hereabouts in

The idea of taking offense at interruption is actually a minor tradition in the history of theatre. It just happens to be the one that's prevalent in the U.S. right now.

eastern Kentucky, southern West Virginia, and southwest Virginia. People are used to revival tents, and we would paper the holler with fliers, knock on doors. In the afternoon, we'd do a free kids' show of traditional Appalachian tales and music, and then the big show that night. People would stream in to hear about the coming of king coal, a story in which they still had a stake.

I can remember on many occasions that we'd be somewhere in the middle of this play and an audience member would just

interrupt the performance, and say, "Well, you're missing a piece of information here." And then, he or she would rattle off the information. Or, someone would interrupt and say, "Well, I heard a different story and it goes like this"

That's the kind of ownership of the play local people felt. And we encouraged it. It turned out in this instance that the people's version was more historically accurate than the version written by the industrialists.

So you take interruptions and conversation as a positive thing as opposed to, for more traditional theatres, the idea that an audience interrupting the narrative and the emotional flow as a negative.

I think the idea of taking offense at interruption is actually a minor tradition in the history of theatre. It just happens to be the one that's prevalent in the U.S. right now. If we were to survey theatre around the world, I think we would conclude that call and response in some form is more the rule than the exception.

How would you describe the effect you're trying to have on your audiences? What do you want to happen to the audience in the course of experiencing the work?

We want the audience to find a closer relationship with their own story and with the stories of others -- and the Other. We, for example, do a lot of intercultural work. One of the ensembles we've collaborated with for almost three decades is a black theatre company from New Orleans called Junebug Productions. We've made a lot of plays together, including a play called *Junebug/Jack*, which examines through music and story the historical relationship between

black and white working class people in the South.

So, the trick, for us while on tour, was how in the world are we going to get black and white working class people to come to the play? And if we don't get black and white working class people to come to the play, haven't we defeated the play's purpose?

So, we had a problem, because black and white working class people, in the main, do not attend professional touring theatre. In fact, in the main black and white working class people don't typically go on social outings together. We solved the problem, after some amount of experimentation, by saying that any community wanting to present the play had to pull together an ecumenical choir to perform in the show. This would be some singers from the black church, some from the white church, a few from the women's chorus, maybe some from the high school. An inclusive community chorus, if you will.

We would send the new chorus the show's music several months in advance of our arrival. They would select someone from their community to serve as chorus master to conduct their rehearsals. And then a few days before the performance, I would arrive and stage the chorus members into the production – even giving them some choice lines to memorize.

Well, a lot of things happened in the course of this process. For starters, the play's presenter had to begin thinking about her whole community. The singers didn't come together because of the play's theme of the relationship between race and class. They came together because they loved to sing, and this professional play looked like a good opportunity to shine. In the course of rehearsing the music, the singers hit on a new sound that had really never been heard in the community, simply because all those different voices had never been brought together before, and certainly not with the particular intention of the play's content.

The word went around that there was a kind of new sound going down. And it was local: "It's our sound, it's coming from so and so who lives just six houses that way." Young people got interested because it wasn't the same-old. So, by the time the show went up, all the community turned out. And of course it didn't hurt that all the churches had to show up to support their choir members.

Because the performances enabled people to feel confident about their role

We want the performance to be meaningful to the people who are in the audience. They take the risk of attending, because they think they're going to get something meaningful out of it.

as singers and about their own traditions, cultural chips on shoulders fell away. Everyone was eager to witness and to learn more about the other traditions; to experience how the black people sang, or how the white people sang, or what inflections young people brought to the song.

It really took off as a community happening. And then, from these performances, we would break into our story circles. And the community would now be charged up and feel a new permission to tell stories that maybe they had never told to each other, because white and black people and young and older hadn't been together in that trustful way before.

In those circles, you would often get a recounting of some local racial incident. But instead of hearing it in one dimension, you were now hearing it from two or three different, distinct personal perspectives. And so for the first time the community was telling their own story to themselves in a new, more complex way. That really charges up a community.

Your model relies on the storytelling as not only the formal part of the presentation, but also as the way that audiences interact with the experience afterwards. I imagine that makes for a very memorable performance. Is that a goal of Roadside's, to have performances that stick in the brains of the people that see them? Or is that simply a side effect?

Well, we don't say to ourselves we want this performance to stick in the brains of the people who see it, but you're right. We want the performance to be meaningful to the people who are in the audience -- the majority of whom are not accustomed to attending professional theatre. They take the risk of attending, because they think they're going to get something meaningful out of it.

As we know, people who are on the short end of the economic stick don't have as much free time as people who are wealthy. So, they have to be intentional

about how they spend their time and money. That is important to us. When we're creating a play, before we get very far into the process, we think, "Here's our theme, what effect do we want to have, and how might it be useful to audience members?"

So, in the *Junebug/Jack* example, we wanted the play to help the community open up a much more realistic dialogue in the present tense about race and class. And that means coming to some understanding of the history of race and class generally in the South, but also, then, through the story circles, moving into the particular history of that community. We want to stimulate dialogue and then to leave something in place so that the dialogue will continue after we leave.

So you are always working from a larger impulse. Theatre is a means to a larger end, a bigger conversation.

Yeah. And it used to be that wasn't so unusual. There was a lot of action around this idea, coming out of the '60s, into the '70s, and even continuing into the '80s. And then you have something happen with the election of Ronald Reagan. Before that, nonprofit cultural organizations inspired by the southern civil rights movement, like the Caribbean Cultural Center in New York City and Appalshop, were as much about the public humanities as they were about the arts. For example, until 1981 the NEH, not NEA, was Appalshop's largest source of public support.

In the late 1970s, Appalshop began receiving a series of grants from the NEH to plan, script, and produce a seven-part documentary film series on the history of Appalachia. We had just finished the pilot film of the series when William Bennett took over as NEH chair and immediately—and without discussion—canceled all future funding for our project. And that begins a political trend of suppressing people's voices and histories in the little nonprofit arts and humanities sector.

That has certainly been my experience, based on what has happened to Appalshop and its peer organizations, and in such political circumstances one then has to spend significant time fighting for a different culture policy just in order to carve out some space to be able to do the creative work.

And that political trend has led to a solidification of what might be called the "traditional theatre?"

If by traditional theatre, you mean the Western European canon – yes. That tradition gained added strength after the Second World War with the rise of the nonprofit regional theatres. But even those theatres, when they were first created, had an impulse that was much closer to Roadside’s, which was to tell their region’s story. And then those regional theatres moved to an industrial assembly line production model. From the beginning, Roadside was an ensemble theatre, and never went toward that model -- of course, you can see how that model would be antithetical to what we were trying to do. I think that model is slowly fading in our new post-industrial era. If we remain a vibrant democracy, I expect U.S. theatre to return to its deeper roots – and thereby develop a much stronger relationship with so-called world theatre.

The fact that there was no professional Appalachian theatre before Roadside has been a great advantage in many ways. Every possibility was open to us. We felt very free to experiment, and we have continued to experiment with both form and content, drawing on our own indigenous theatrical traditions and co-creating plays, which are often bilingual, with other theatres steeped in their own cultural traditions. And we were lucky in that, pretty much right out of the chute, we were able to go to New York, where we were well-received, favorably covered by the press, and so on.

We never got caught in that psychology of feeling like, well, we may be good at home, but nobody would like us beyond here—which you would hope wouldn’t matter, but it does. Never being burdened by that, we ranged out, experimented, and all the while tried to stay true to our founding values.

Once, I remember, we were performing at the Manhattan Theater Club, close to the beginning of our theatrical journey, and at intermission, I overheard two older women who were the type that had probably seen a play a week for the past 30 years. Clearly they were extremely knowledgeable about New York theatre. So the taller one leans over to her friend and says, “You know, Helen, these actors have the best Appalachian accents I’ve ever encountered.”