



Roadside Theater's Tour of North Dakota: A Prototype

Roadside Theater Appalshop 306 Madison Street Whitesburg KY 41858 606.633.0108

"NEW TOWN, North Dakota, population 1300 - half Anglo, half Native American. The first stop on the tour. The evening performance of MOUNTAIN TALES is made special by the set, an array of Appalachian and Arikara Indian quilts, and the Eagle Dancers, the high school Native American dance group. Traditional singers from neighboring Mandaree joined the young dancers, whose earnest manner of caring for their heritage was very moving to the large audience. Roadside's Old Regular Baptist version of 'Amazing Grace' closed the performance. Then Scandinavian and German ladies served strong coffee and exceptionally good pastries . Everyone was excited and stood around visiting and eating."

- Excerpt from Roadside Theater's North Dakota Tour Journal

Roadside Theater

Roadside is an ensemble theater whose home is in the central Appalachian coalfields of southwest Virginia and east Kentucky. Roadside's actors, musicians, and writers were born and reared in the region, and the company develops original plays drawn from the rich mountain history and culture of its home. Roadside has been touring for 15 years to enthusiastic audiences throughout the southeast, in the midwest and west, in New England, off-Broadway in New York City, and to national festivals such as the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, and to international festivals such as the Other America festivals in Denmark and Sweden, and the London International Festival of Theatre. The theater visits between 50 and 70 communities each year.

North Dakota Tour Description

During September, 1988, Roadside performed in 16 communities across North Dakota as part of a special tour sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Dakota Council on the Arts, and Arts Midwest. The tour was initiated as a rural cultural exchange. By choice most of the performance sites were small towns. In addition to the Roadside performances, each stop featured some of the host communities' most accomplished artists. A variety of presenters participated in the tour including area arts councils, colleges and universities, community theater groups, and a state park.

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During the 25 day tour, there were 32 shows and 14 workshops for more than 7,000 people. There was a mix of age groups and cultural backgrounds represented in the audiences. Roadside's performances were complimented by the participation of the local artists – musicians, cowboy poets, Native American dancers, and storytellers who performed with the Roadside artists – and by the quilts and visual arts displayed at the performance sites. Communities on the tour welcomed Roadside at social gatherings that featured traditional food, square dances, and spirited conversation.

The Tour's Purpose and Goals

As a national touring company, Roadside Theater wants to work with arts presenters and presenting networks that focus their programming on the celebration of local culture. Believing that a Roadside Theater performance, because it is drawn from a specific culture and performed by artists who are a part of that culture, can act as a catalyst for celebrating local life, host communities were encouraged to highlight their own traditions and artists.

The goals of the tour were:

- **to enable communities to discover their own cultural resources through the involvement of local artists**
- **to give individual communities the sense of belonging to a statewide network of arts presenters**
- **to bring high quality professional theater to underserved rural audiences**

Within the framework of presenting Roadside Theater as a professional company from rural Appalachia, North Dakota residents had the opportunity to take pride in the talents of their own artists. Based on the excitement about the tour shared by sponsors, audiences, and artists, Roadside is encouraged to continue developing this touring model in other regions and states.

Producing the North Dakota Tour

During 1987, the North Dakota Council on the Arts and Roadside Theater had several conversations about their mutual interest in reaching rural audiences. The idea of a tour based on rural cultural exchange was conceived. A plan was created for a statewide tour, and the Arts Council applied for funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Upon securing NEA support, the Arts Council contacted potential local sponsors to meet with Roadside to talk about the tour. A Roadside staff member flew to North Dakota to get acquainted with the sponsors, introduce Roadside's work, and continue discussions about the involvement of local artists. NEA funding made it possible for the North Dakota Council on the Arts to subsidize fees for these sponsors. The Arts Council's proactive role was important to achieving the goals of the tour.

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For four months Roadside worked with each sponsor to coordinate the local aspects of the program. Artists in each community - fiddlers, old-time swing bands, cowboy poets, storytellers, and Native American dancers - were invited to participate in performances that included story swaps, concerts, and square dances. In addition to North Dakota artists sharing the stage with Roadside, workshops exploring Roadside's method of adapting its local oral histories and stories to the stage were used to call attention to a community's own histories and older storytellers.

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Workshops in storytelling, oral history collection, play development, and ensemble acting for community theater groups and drama students also encouraged exploration of local cultural traditions.

Performances of Roadside's original plays, *MOUNTAIN TALES AND MUSIC* and *PRETTY POLLY* were enhanced by educational activities scheduled in each community, where Roadside visited schools to tell tales and talk about Appalachian culture and hear about North Dakota culture. Workshops in storytelling, oral history collection, play development, and ensemble acting for community theater groups and drama students also encouraged exploration of local cultural traditions.



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Since a priority for all Roadside touring is reaching ethnically and culturally diverse audiences, Roadside has developed presenter materials that are geared toward getting out an audience that represents a broad cross-section of a community. North Dakota sponsors received Roadside posters, radio spots, press releases, publicity photos, and a manual with calendar detailing how to use the promotional materials. Radio and television spots, aired as public service announcements, helped reach a non-theater going audience. For this tour, a special focus was reaching Native American people, accomplished by contacting community leaders on reservations. Schools were sent study guides to help teachers incorporate the Roadside presentation into their curriculum. Workshop participants received support materials including bibliographies of Appalachian writings, background on Roadside Theater and its ensemble method of working, and, when applicable, script samples.

Statewide promotion and publicity for the tour was orchestrated by the Arts Council. A North Dakota graphic artist designed the tour's widely distributed poster, which included the itinerary. The poster was reduced to bookmark size and distributed throughout the state library system. The Arts Council also sent press releases via the state press office and met with Prairie Public Television and North Dakota Public Radio to arrange coverage of the tour. A broadcast of RED FOX/SECOND HANGIN', Roadside's oral history play that the theater adapted for television, aired statewide on public television, and daily radio reports from each site helped to create an aural portrait of the tour.

Roadside's tech director coordinated staging and technical requirements with the sponsors. The Arts Council arranged for the use of a state van, including gasoline, and state employee discounts for lodging.

Evaluation

North Dakota audiences and media praised the performances for their quality and the company for its professionalism. The idea that the host community encourage local artists to share the stage was judged to be an excellent one. The local talent was of consistently high quality.

Audiences were made up of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Young people, families, and elder citizens from towns, colleges, outlying farms, and Indian reservations attended. Sponsors remarked that the audiences included many new faces.

... daily radio reports from each site helped to create an aural portrait of the tour.

Young people, families, and elder citizens from towns, colleges, outlying farms, and Indian reservations attended the tour events.



... a North Dakota newspaper editorial challenged the local community to heed the Roadside message and tell their own stories rather than letting the national and regional media speak for them.

Roadside Theater looks forward to partnerships which will further develop this touring model for rural cultural exchange.

Following Roadside's visit, a newspaper editorial in Jamestown (a hard-hit agricultural town) challenged the local community to heed the Roadside message and tell their own stories rather than letting the national and regional media speak for them.

A statewide network of North Dakota presenters was established and given the experience of working cooperatively. The North Dakota Council on the Arts was a catalyst for the tour; their leadership and cooperation in co-producing was exemplary.

Looking Ahead

Roadside Theater looks forward to partnerships which will further develop this touring model for rural cultural exchange.

- The model will continue to emphasize that the tour is only one milestone in what must be a longer range plan adopted by the state or regional sponsor to celebrate and perpetuate rural indigenous art.
- More pre-tour work with educators, including advance telephone conversations and written materials, will make school programs more meaningful for students and teachers.
- Future tours will continue to seek innovative ways to involve culturally and ethnically diverse audiences.
- There is a wonderful opportunity for the electronic media to be more involved in promoting as well as documenting a tour.



Roadside Theater performers include (left to right) Tommy Bledsoe, Ron Short and Angelyn DeBord. The show will be in Fargo Sept. 22-23 at North Dakota State University.

Roadside Theater tour is a cultural exchange

By Catherine Zaiser.
STAFF WRITER

By the time Roadside Theater has completed its circuit of 13 North Dakota communities, their audiences will know more about Appalachian folklore and customs and the Virginia actors will have a pack of information on Dakota tales and traditions to take back with them.

Roadside Theater and its sponsor, The North Dakota Council on the Arts, have designed the company's performance/workshop schedule as a cultural exchange.

"We've tried to figure out how to highlight our own artists and the communities' own traditions," director Dudley Cocks said in a telephone interview from Whitesburg, Ky.

The tour began Wednesday night in New Town, where Appalachian quilts along with quilts and weavings by area residents were combined to decorate the set. When the troupe gets to Williston, there'll be a square dance.

And at every opportunity the company will strike up the band with local musicians.

"I understand you've got a pretty strong fiddle tradition here," Cocks said. "We've got a good fiddler in our group too."

Central to the tour are two performances "Mountain Tales," featuring traditional tales and songs children especially enjoy, and "Pretty Polly," which combines tales, family remembrances, and songs to relate the story of a storyteller, Polly Branham Johnson.

A third presentation, "Red Fox/Second Hangin'" airs on Prairie Public Television at 5 p.m. Sunday. It's a play Cocks wrote for the Roadside Theater 14 years ago. He stayed on to stage it, and then produced it as a 90-minute television special.

"Red Fox" tells in Roadside's style which combines storytelling and story theater, the tale of Doc Taylor — the legendary Red Fox of the Cumberlands. He was a preacher, medical doctor, U.S. marshal and was the second man hanged in Wise County, Va.

The material for the presentations was culled from the oral history of the Appalachian Mountains and archetypal mythology, fact and fiction become intermingled in the telling.

And what makes it stand out — what makes it play Off-Broadway as well as it does in Kentucky — is the language.

A reviewer for the Las Vegas Sun makes this observation: "The speech rhythms, the Appalachian dialects are a joy to hear. The speech patterns have a compelling variety of highs and lows, sometimes

evangelical assertiveness, sometimes a dancing glibness of sounds."

This is not a road show of Hollywood-style hillbillies. That stereotype does not fit Virginians Ron Short of Big Stone Gap, Tommy Bledsoe of Snowflake, and Angelyn DeBord of Moccasin Creek, who will be performing here.

Their first allegiance is to the local audience which is always the first to hear new material.

"We're making the plays for the people we know — the coalminers and the working class people. It's a theater with a culture, and although we tour all over the country, the primary thing is to make it for the people here," Cocks said.

Playing Off-Broadway is exciting, the director said, "but we're much more interested in the small towns of North Dakota, which I think are very similar (to Kentucky and Virginia) in a lot of ways."

One of the projects the company will undertake in several North Dakota towns is to help residents write plays about their own folklore and traditions.

"Everybody's got a story, there are just different ways to tell it in every group of people. Everyone has to begin where they're at," Cocks said.

"In rural communities people tend to be more in touch with tradition, certainly more than people in the suburbs."

Serving as a connective thread on the statewide tour are daily 10-minute broadcasts on Prairie Public Radio. The focus of these reports, however, is the host towns and not the guest performers, the goal being to provide an oral portrait of the state.

Here's the show schedule:

SEPTEMBER

Friday and Saturday — Williston, 7:30 p.m., Old Armory Theater.

15 — Minot, 7 p.m., Mouse House Theater.

16 — Minot, 8:30 p.m. McFarland Auditorium.

18 — Turtle River State Park, near Arvilla, 2 and 6 p.m.

19 — Cavalier, 8 p.m., city hall.

20 — Devils Lake, 7:30 p.m., UND-Lake Region auditorium.

21 — Fort Totten, 1:30 and 2:15 p.m., high school gymnasium.

22-23 — Fargo, 8:15 p.m., Walsh Studio Theatre, Little Country Theatre, NDSU.

25 — Lidgerwood, 7:15 p.m., public school auditorium.

26 — Valley City, 7:30 p.m., Valley City State University cafeteria.

28 — Jamestown, 8 p.m., Thompson Auditorium.

29 — Bismarck, 8 p.m., Sidney J. Lee Auditorium, Bismarck State University.

30 — Dickinson, 7:30 p.m., Trinity Auditorium.

OCTOBER

1 — Reeder, 7:30 p.m., school gymnasium.

Take charge of the stories we are telling

An Editor's Opinion
By JAMES SMORADA

Old wisdom and Napoleon said that history is written by the victors. True, but what does it mean?

Put another way, it means that if we are to insure our future, we must control the stories about now. To insure the future for the state, the town, we must decide now what is being said about us. That decision will condition what will be said of us later.

The Jamestown Arts Center presented a performance by two men and a woman Wednesday night. Roadside Theater offered songs and stories as taught by the elders of the mountains of Appalachia.

You remember Appalachia. It was that poor corner of the nation 20 years ago that could not feed itself. We all have a media picture in mind: dirt road, shack by a stream, hollow-eyed folks in shapeless clothes looking hopeless.

The picture was a politician's meadow, a place to plant promises and raise expectations. What happened there is not unlike what is happening to this place today, the performers pointed out.

The media picture did not include the information about the region's past. It did not recall that Appalachia produced the wood and coal for this nation in two great world wars. The media did not recall that parts of the region gave itself until it was exhausted.

Appalachians got pity for their efforts. Poor people in the mountains became part of a political push. Thankfully pity was not the final word.

The mountains were not full of poor people. The coal may have been mined and the woods cut down but the people prevailed. In them some of the comic and dramatic genius of the nation flowered - decades ago and again in this century. The seeds caught the wind. The place still produces those who teach a nation how to sing, to tell stories and how to laugh. No wonder Nashville is nearby.

These people control the stories, not the politicians, not the media. The rest of us will not remember the poverty but we'll retell a tale, sing a song, laugh with them. We will look back and see ourselves.

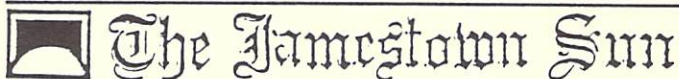
What is being said about North Dakota these days is not unlike that which is being said about Appalachia 20 years ago. We are told that we are in trouble. We are told the farm-based economy is insufficient to support its people so they are leaving. Nothing is coming in to replace the migrants. North Dakota is a poor place getting poorer. No industrial growth has become something of a political issue.

We all know the stories by heart. There is precious little to counter them. This is the kind of scenario custom-made for political hay. We don't need hay, according to the Roadside Theater troupe, we need to take charge of our stories.

This is not the first time that people here have faced adversity. There are stories of the grim and humorous in each family. The survivors tell them. The media accounts do not talk about the fact that people are generally safe from physical harm here, raise families and have reunions.

We don't need to get all fussed up when someone teases the state about its northern-ness; Alaska has made a name for itself and it's much colder.

Taking charge of the story is an individual effort. It means listening to the old ones and repeating their versions. It means something else too. It means we stop doting on the one version of our fate unless, of course, we want it to come true.



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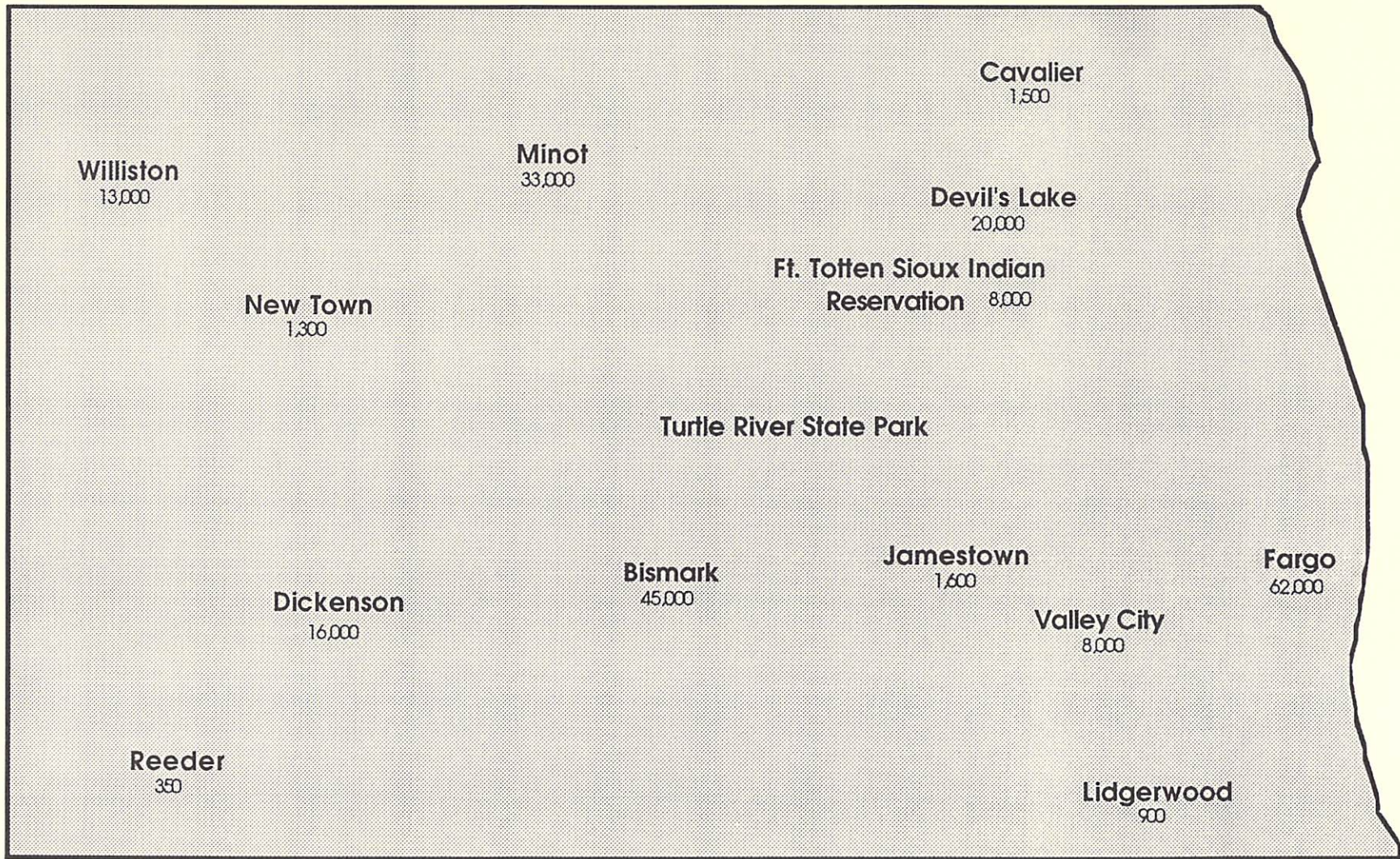
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Numbers = Population
Total population = 701,200

North Dakota Tour