

# Mountain tale beguiles New Yorkers

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New York's fashionable East Side might seem the last spot in the country that would prove hospitable to a trio of self-confessed mountain boys from Appalachia telling tales about fightin' and feudin' among their ancestors.

Yet, such a group recently held theater audiences in powerful sway at New York's highly esteemed Manhattan Theatre Club, located in Gotham's East 70s between First and Second Avenues.

Their show, called "Red Fox/Second Hangin'," is a production of Appalshop's Roadside Theatre in Whitesburg, Ky., and it garnered the kind of critical and audience response that may well spur interest in other parts of the country.

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" isn't a new enterprise. But it is the first show to gain wide attention for Roadside Theatre, organized by Don Baker in 1974 as part of Whitesburg's non-profit media cooperative, Appalshop.

Baker wrote "Red Fox" with Dudley Cocke, a friend from their student days at Washington and Lee University, to show the people of Appalachia that valid art can be created "from things around them and that a society can grow exciting theater from its own roots."

Cocke and Baker therefore unfold "Red Fox" in a style derived from story-telling techniques familiar to all natives of Appalachia. They presented its world premiere in Alabama's Draper Men's Prison, where a lot of Appalachia's erring sons wind up doing time.

This was in 1976, and Roadside Theatre has been touring "Red Fox" ever since, primarily in mountain areas, but also in "Urban Appalachia," those Northern cities with large colonies of displaced mountaineers.

It was only recently that Roadside be-

gan taking "Red Fox" to city slickers in Washington, D. C. and New York. Part of its interest in playing to such metropolitan audiences is financial. Funds are always short, so Baker, Cocke and colleagues would invite representatives of important foundations and powerful government agencies to such performances.

"We'd blow into town," says Cocke, "do a show, get out the country ham and beaten biscuits, and make a pitch for support."

It's too early to tell, Cocke says, just what support will be forthcoming, since foundations and government agencies are notoriously slow in processing applications. But such exposure led to the recent stint of "Red Fox" at the Manhattan Theatre Club, and it's likely other support will materialize.

When I saw "Red Fox" at one of its final New York performances recently, it held a capacity audience spellbound in one of the smallish theaters that make up the multiple-arena Manhattan Theatre Club. And it's easy to understand why.

Baker, who's played the show's principal narrator since its beginning, joins Gary Slep and Frankie Taylor (the three are friends from childhood) to spin a fascinating yarn of mountain feuds and tangled family relationships. The story involves a wicked gang of outsiders called the Big Stone Gap Bunch, who invade the mountains along Kingdom Come Creek in an attempt to build a new Pittsburgh. And its hero is "Doc" Taylor who tries to prevent such invaders from putting the natural resources of his beloved mountains to purposes that will eventually destroy them.

"Doc" Taylor is one of Appalachia's great legends. "People'd rather sit and listen to him talk," Baker says, "than eat gingerbread come election time."

Taylor has found his way into fiction,

notably as a thinly disguised character in the novels of John Fox Jr.

But Fox, claim Baker and Cocke, distorted history and mountain life in his novels, perpetrating the myth that mountain people, in order to make anything of their lives, must get out of the hills and go off to be educated, as does the heroine of "Trail of the Lonesome Pine."

Baker, who grew up in Wise County, Virginia, (across the mountains from Whitesburg) tried that route. "I went off to Washington and Lee to become a Virginia gentleman," he admits. After graduation, he took a job at an embassy in Washington and joined a theater group. But he got homesick for the mountains, as so many mountain-folk do, and finally decided to return to his native hearth.

Although bitten by the theater bug, Baker thought he'd have to give up such pursuits when he returned home. Instinctively, he realized that "traditional theater wouldn't sit on the mountains. People just wouldn't feel comfortable."

Gradually, however, Baker came to a conviction that drama making use of native tales would grip the imagination of his neighbors. So he and Cocke deliberately set out to create "Red Fox" as a show "that wouldn't be embarrassing for us to do or for my friends to see. We wanted it to be natural and without pretense. And we wanted it to be true."

The writers spent a lot of time digging in attics and rummaging through old courthouse records. "Doc" Taylor emerged from those documents very different from the man in Fox's fiction or history books. They also talked to people who knew him, or had attended his hanging, since they feel such oral transmissions are the most trustworthy basis for reconstructing history.

The Taylor who comes to life in their theatrical narrative is a mystic and visionary far ahead of his time. He was a

conservationist long before conservation became a burning issue in Appalachia. And he paid for his convictions with his life.

Or did he? Cocke and Baker have unearthed intriguing evidence that suggests Taylor was wily enough to devise a plot whereby his hanging was faked, rigged up with a spring harness, and that he later fled to Missouri to make a new life in Saline County on the edge of the Ozarks. Giving the tale substance is the fact that his grave in Wise County, if indeed he was actually hanged and buried there, was never marked.

So Cocke, who admits to a hunch this story is based on truth, is hoping for funding to make a search in Missouri for Taylor's actual grave. If he finds it, "Red Fox" will get a dramatically different ending from its present one.

Even now, the play constantly changes, according to the audiences it plays to. In New York, Baker and his colleagues performed a short version, illustrated by beautiful old photographs culled from the archives of Alice Lloyd College and the like. It is accompanied by recordings of mountain fiddlers.

"But when we play the mountains," says Baker, "our show can go on for hours. You see, we're dealing with family relationships, and there is positively no way you can lose a mountain audience when you're dealing with families. They come to see if we've got the stories right, and they talk back to us if they think we're making mistakes."

So Roadside Theatre takes "Red Fox" to mountain weddings and family reunions, to rural fairs and church socials.

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" re-creates, with great charm and visible passion, a part of this country's past the entire nation can treasure. If its inspiration originates in Appalachia, its appeal is universal.