

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

# ARTS AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

Exploring Cultural Development  
Policies, Practices, and Dilemmas



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ROUTLEDGE

The Routledge logo, which consists of a stylized white 'R' shape.

## Chapter 7

# Community Cultural Development as a Site of Joy, Struggle, and Transformation

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**Dudley Cocke**

### Introduction

This chapter reports the search by a rural, professional theater company, never numbering more than a dozen members, for a cultural development paradigm that utilizes the inherent intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of a community to encourage individual agency in support of community well-being. Based on its theatrical experiments, Roadside Theater eventually would claim that by sharing (performing) and examining one's personal story in public settings marked by manifold perspectives, not only can one learn to speak for one self from the depth of one's own experience, but one can learn to act in concert with others to achieve what is fair and just for the whole in which one resides. This assertion would be decades in gestation as the theater company's artists and producers learned from hundreds of communities in its home region of Appalachia and across the United States.

If community cultural development (CCD) means developing the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of a community, then CCD has been the core of Roadside Theater's effort since its inception 40 years ago. Beginning its work in its own backyard, Roadside eventually—for ideological, aesthetic, and economic reasons—turned

its attention to helping communities beyond its Appalachian homeland develop their inherent artistic assets as a means of celebrating local life, of wrestling with community problems, and of catalyzing potential personal and collective transformation.

## **Beginning**

Roadside Theater's journey of discovery began with several questions nagging the theater's founding members:

- Could a small group of community-trained musicians, storytellers, and writers create a professional theater in a place—the coalfields of central Appalachia—with no history of the same?
- Could the content and form of such a theater be fabricated from local sources found within an area of approximately 20 counties in parts of five adjoining states—eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, southern West Virginia, western North Carolina, and upper eastern Tennessee?
- And could the ensuing regional dramas appeal to people anywhere?

With these questions in mind, a group of young Appalachian musicians and storytellers started rehearsing traditional Jack and Mutsmeg (the female version of Jack) tales and performing them in schools and local community centers in central Appalachia. During a three-year (1916-1918) visit to the United States, English ethnomusicologist Cecil Sharp had observed that these centuries-old archetypal stories and ballads were more intact in Appalachian communities than they were in the British Isles, where they originated (Yates, 1999).<sup>1</sup> In their spirited retellings, the Roadside actors spontaneously traded characters, batting the old stories' lines back and forth, and generally "cutting a big shine." Upon

ending a tale like *Jack and the Heifer Hide*, with its rousing shared finale, “And the last time I went down to see Jack, he was a-doin’ well,” the performers would break into song accompanied by fiddle, banjo, and sometimes the twang of a jaw harp, “I wish I was a hole in the ground/I wish I was a hole in the ground / If I was a hole in the ground / I’d be a mountain upside down / I wish I was a hole in the ground.”

The group that undertook this work took the name Roadside Theater and began offering performances wherever the group’s actors hung their coats. Area schools usually could afford between \$50 and \$75 for an assembly performance, and \$3 was the standard adult admission to an evening Roadside show in a community center or church hall. Appalachian people of all ages loved what the company was doing—there just was not enough local money to support it.



**Roadside Theater performs a traditional Jack tale**

Since the arrival of large-scale coal mining in the 1890's, central Appalachia has been a rich land with poor people. Singer-songwriter John Prine succinctly suggested why in a famous song, "Paradise": "Mister Peabody's coal train done hauled it away" (Prine, 1971). From this perspective, the region has been a mineral colony, at first of national, and thereafter of global energy corporations that have taken its natural wealth and left little behind.

Fortunately for the band of young Roadside storytellers and musicians, a local job training program for youth, the Appalachian Film Workshop, had transitioned in 1972 into a nonprofit corporation, Appalshop, which was busy documenting Appalachian life in the voices of Appalachian people. Appalshop intentionally had established itself in Whitesburg, Kentucky, the hometown of lawyer and author Harry Caudill and of Tom and Pat Gish, publishers of *The Mountain Eagle* newspaper. Caudill and the Gishes' were outspoken critics of poverty and its causes. "It Screams" was on the masthead of *The Mountain Eagle*, and after the newspaper offices were torched in 1974 by an arsonist hired by a Whitesburg policeman, the next edition proclaimed, "It Still Screams." Harry Caudill's (1963) angry book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* painted a picture of an isolated area colonized after the Civil War by national corporations rapacious in their extraction of the mountains' wealth of coal and timber and without regard for the region's people, many of whom, like Caudill's ancestors, were of Scots-Irish and Cherokee descent. Caudill's insider analysis attracted the attention of the John F. Kennedy Administration staff working on poverty policy, and subsequently the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration officials who would launch the national War on Poverty in 1964 from the front porch of the Fletcher family home in Martin County, Kentucky.

In 2014, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War on Poverty, Appalshop is an example of a federal job training program that succeeded, but there's a twist concerning why. In 1969 when the Appalachian Film Workshop started, the closest airport to the training initiative's location in Whitesburg was three and a half hours away, and there was no bus or train service to the community. This meant the Workshop's absentee supervisors in Washington, D.C. were unable to guide the development of its program closely, and this relative lack of oversight resulted in the trainees learning by doing: they took the government issued equipment and started making films. Their subjects were their neighbors and kin—a hog butchering on a frosty morning, a mid-wife assisting a birth (twins as it turned out, to everyone's surprise), and foot washing at the Old Regular Baptist Church. The power of telling their own culture's stories quickly became apparent to the trainees, who believed that even their amateur results were more revealing and authentic than the War on Poverty renditions permeating the professional mass media. In 1971, when the government ended its support for such job training centers, the trainees and their local supervisors, Bill and Josephine Richardson, began the process of incorporating as a charitable organization with the educational mission to tell central Appalachia's story through the voices of the people living there. With a similar purpose and a felt need to develop an alternative to working in the mines, young local musicians and storytellers were welcomed into the Appalshop fold of documentary filmmakers. In less than two decades, Appalshop would develop into the region's leading producer of music recordings, plays, and radio and film documentaries.

Because Appalshop's productions were popular, the organization's leadership decided to apply for government supported grants. In Roadside's case, the result was that for two

consecutive years the Kentucky Arts Council rejected the theater's applications for assistance. Judging from the distribution of its tax generated grants and the tone of its staff members in public meetings and private conversations, Appalshop staff concluded that the Council's attitude, if not its policy, was that a professional theater could not possibly exist in such a backward part of the state. That outcome convinced Roadside's principals that the shortest route to the Kentucky state capital, Frankfort, was through New York City.

As it turned out, Roadside's new play, *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* (1976), was a hit in the Big Apple, first downtown at the Theater for the New City (1977), and then uptown at the Manhattan Theatre Club (1978). *Red Fox*, as it came to be known, told the story of the first coal boom on the Cumberland Plateau and the life-and-death debate it stirred among local people. In front of projections of old photographs of the period and of the play's real-life characters, three performers (as it happened, all distant kin of the play's protagonists) offered the story with overlapping lines and unisons:

**Gary Dale:** You see now about that time, there's an awful lot of rich city folks figured that there was a lot of money to be made in these mountains,

**Hoyt:** and they just figured

**D. H. and Gary Dale (as rich city folks):** they'd be the very ones to make it.

**Gary Dale:** They knowed for a long time that there was iron ore and timber and coal back in here, but they hadn't been able to figure out how to get it out.

**Hoyt:** By 1885, they'd about got all the bugs worked outta that little problem

**D. H. and Gary Dale (as rich city folks):** and was ready to start a-makin' their money.

**Hoyt:** Everybody was expectin' to make them a king's ransom. It was just like the California gold rush.

**D. H.:** Now, they's a little town 20 miles from the Mud Hole called Big Stone Gap

**Hoyt** and they's people pourin' into little bitty Big Stone Gap

**D. H. and Hoyt:** from all over this world!

**D. H. (asa duke):** There's even a duke

**Gary Dale (asa duchess)** and duchess

**D. H. and Gary Dale:** from London, England.

**Hoyt:** Them fellers set about to make little bitty Big Stone Gap

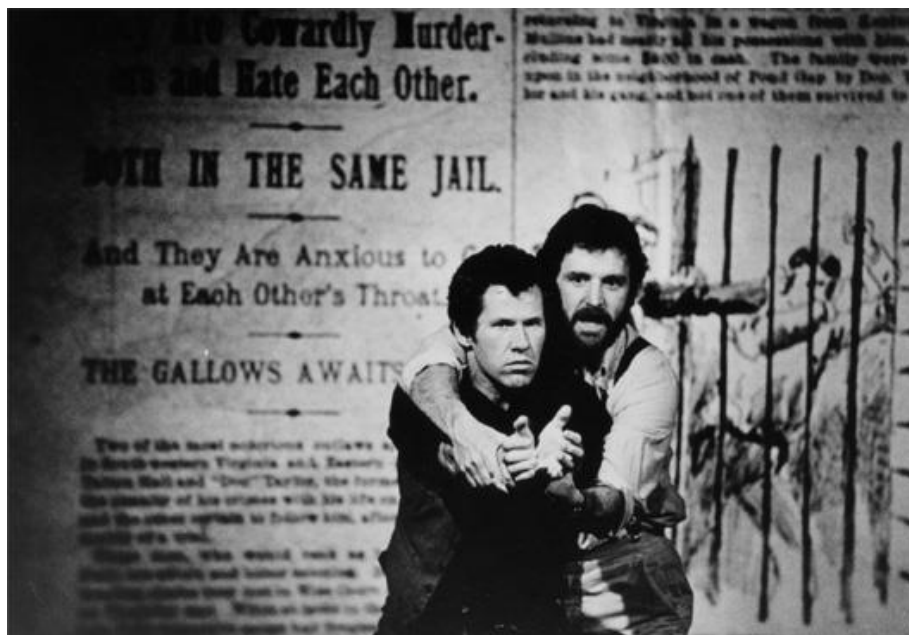
**Together:** into the Pittsburgh of the South!

**D. H.:** They's runnin' full page advertisements in the *New York Times*

**Gary Dale (reading from paper):** proclaiming as how, "This country has everything to offer to make you a fortune. They have timber, coal, and iron ore, all in one spot. The natives have no idea of the money they're sittin' on, and there are men who know how to talk to these natives"

**D. H. and Hoyt:** like Devil John Wright

**Gary Dale:** "and not pay anything for it, either" (Anderson & Nobrigo, 1994, pp. 79-80)



Roadside Theater performs *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*



The tone of the New York reviews reflected the difference between the play's initial downtown audience, and the one uptown. In the West Village, *Red Fox* was hailed by *The Village Voice* as "a series of hard male pranks ... akin to *Wisconsin Death Trip*" (Sainer, 1977), while *The Christian Science Monitor* proclaimed the uptown performances "...remarkable entertainment, the likes of which New York folks don't encounter every day" (Beaufort, 1978). After *The New York Times* announced *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* was, "as stirring to the audience for its historical detective work as for the vanishing art of frontier yarn spinning" (Franklin, 1977), and *The Louisville Courier Journal* reported the play was "a part of this country's past the entire nation can treasure" (Mootz, 1978), Kentucky Arts Council (KAC) staff flew north to see the production—and, in its next granting cycle (1978), the KAC joined the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in supporting Roadside's work.

From its inception, Roadside's ensemble members understood that the stories they told and the way they conveyed them were different from mainstream theater. In Manhattan, Roadside was identified with avant-garde ensembles like Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group. At home in the mountains, if anyone troubled to categorize the company, it was as folk theater. In fact, Roadside was probably the only professional theater to receive support from the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk Arts Program.<sup>2</sup> For folklorists, the decisive factor was that Roadside artists had learned their craft not in the academy, but instead in and from the Appalachian communities in which they had grown up. Roadside also received numerous grants from the NEA Theatre, Opera Musical Theatre, and Expansion Arts programs.

The New York City experience confirmed that the Whitesburg-based company had developed a unique theatrical aesthetic and fresh content based on what its members had known all their lives: storytelling, ballad singing, oral histories, and church. The theater group had demonstrated that the local and specific, when rendered faithfully and imaginatively in the voices of the culture's young people, could touch audiences anywhere. Roadside had brought to the stage some of the inherent genius of its Appalachian community, and what had been a marginal economic enterprise became a nonprofit organization capable of eventually supporting as many as nine full-time ensemble members and nearly half as many part-timers.

With the *Red Fox* experience under its belt, Roadside set about completing a cycle of Appalachian plays in 1980 that chronicled the period from the first European settlement to the present. When completed, the series became the first collection of indigenous Appalachian dramas.<sup>3</sup> The five plays presented a radically different version of the region's history than that published under the auspices of the coal companies that continued to play overweening roles in the economic life of the region. Performance fees from national tours of the productions became a significant part of Roadside's budget, typically accounting for more than half of the theater's annual income. This revenue helped underwrite the extensive performance work Roadside continued to do in its home region, whose residents remained economically strapped. By 1989, as it began its 15<sup>th</sup> year, Roadside had crisscrossed the country multiple times, performing, as it did so, in 34 states.

## The Fork in the Road

The old adage “watch out for what you wish for” began rattling around in the mind of at least one company member as the ensemble traveled from performance to performance.

The “road” is notorious for its homogenizing effect on performers and their art. W.H. Auden captured this effect in *On the Circuit*,

Though warm my welcome everywhere, / I shift so frequently, so fast, / I cannot  
now say where I was / The evening before last. (Auden, 1991, p. 729)

While the young company members found ways to entertain themselves as they traveled, the question became the effect of constant touring on the plays *themselves*.

After 14 years of successfully offering its productions nationally, the company’s members made a decision that surprised many of the people who had been following the ir work: Roadside now would only perform in communities that contractually committed to bringing an inclusive cross-section of their population to the theater’s performances and workshops. Within the ensemble, the decision was made quickly after an epiphany its artistic leadership had while on tour in Nevada: the elite audience for professional theater was re-shaping Roadside’s plays to fit their own class-determined sensibilities.

This audience magic was made possible by the disconnection between the rural, working class origins of the plays’ form and content and the social class of those who attended professional theater. The 2011 study, *Fusing Arts, Culture, and Social Change*, reported “... the majority of arts funding supports large organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million. Such organizations, which comprise less than 2 percent of the universe of arts and cultural nonprofits, receive more than half of the sector’s total revenue. These institutions

focus primarily on Western European art forms, and their programs serve audiences that are predominantly white and upper income” (Sidford, 2011, p. 1).<sup>4</sup> As Roadside’s members became increasingly knowledgeable about the history of U.S. theatre, they began to identify their efforts with the drama produced during the labor and civil rights movements of the last century. Like the producers and artists allied with those social justice movements, Roadside’s artists were focused on preserving and perpetuating the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions and features of economically exploited populations.

This decision—that presenters of Roadside’s work commit to bringing together audiences that reflected their entire community—was risky economically because there was no way that its Appalachian audience of modest economic means could begin to make up the income difference if the company’s national bookings faltered as a result. The decision also tested Roadside’s relationship with its Austin, Texas-based engagement and producing partner, Theresa and Michael Holden of Holden Arts and Associates, who now would have to ensure that this provision of diversity and inclusion was included in every contract. Because the Holdens were trained as artists themselves and shared Roadside’s interest in community engagement and agency, however, they immediately agreed to it.

In contrast to its audiences while on tour, Roadside’s home support comprises almost entirely working, middle class, and economically poor people, in other words, the region’s general population. Attendees do not come to Roadside plays simply as spectators, but, rather, to bear witness to their cultural identity. This is confirmed by community members’ habitual eagerness to contribute stories and music of their own to Roadside productions—and, as the plays are developing, their readiness to attend staged readings of the works in

progress to share their insights on what is working and what might next occur to deepen or further enliven the scripts.

In the Appalachian storytelling, music, and church traditions, performers speak directly to the audience without elaborate sets or a “fourth wall.” No curtain is drawn. Roadside has long sought to arrange its performance spaces so as to dissolve the physical and psychological distance between performers and their audience. For example, company members view orchestra pits as barriers to participation. They perceive the need for undue electronic amplification similarly. Auditorium lights are never so dark that the audience cannot see itself. As with an oft-told family story, Roadside actors know the entire script by heart, not just their individual parts. If a performer is inspired to riff with audience members in spontaneous call-and-response, the other actors are ready to back her up and then land back into the script at just the right moment in the appropriate key. Here’s an example of call-and-response from a transcript of a video of a live performance of *Pretty Polly*, at Cleveland Technical College, Shelby, North Carolina (1986).

**Angelyn:** I think I’ll tell one (*a story*) about your Uncle John

**Tom:** I got two Uncle Johns—one lives on one side of the mountain and the other one lives on the other side. Which Uncle John are you talkin’ about?

**Angelyn:** Honey, he’s the one that lives on the outside of the mountain. Well, I figure it’s better to tell it in front of you, than to tell it behind your back. John lived in a little cabin there on the mountainside, and he was a bachelor feller. Poor old thing, bless his heart.

**Tom:** He was a bachelor by choice!

**Angelyn:** That’s right—the ladies’ choice. Well John had a little garden ...

**Audience Member calls out:** *What did he grow?*

**Angelyn** (taking a step toward the audience member): He had three ol' spindly bean plants and a big 'mater plant ...

**Audience Member:** *and I bet he had some corn!*

**Angelyn:** Well yes, he had a great big field a corn ... Now I always wondered what he done with all that corn.

**Audience Member:** *He was making corn liquor.*

**Angelyn** (to fellow actors on stage): Why looky here boys—they done heard about John all the way down here in North Carolina! . . . (to audience member) Now John wadn't no different than most—ever'body likes a little libation now and again ...

**Audience Member:** *With all that corn, now and again must have been every day!*

**Angelyn** (to audience member): Are you one of them Mullinses from over around Skeet Rock? If ya' are, your Mommy told me to send you home if I run into you anywheres. She said the law was a lookin' for you, so not to take the turnpike.

**Tom** (to Angelyn): Now I don't know about no corn liquor, but I do know that Uncle John raised a few chickens.

**Angelyn:** Well yes, Uncle John did raise a few chickens, of which he was particularly fond, especially when proper cooked. It was this fondness that was responsible for the eventual depletion of his entire flock—for depleted it did become—until finally they's only one old rooster left. But mercy sakes alive, what a rooster that thing was—why he was two or three feet tall! (Pretty Polly, 1986)<sup>5</sup>

The community ownership of Roadside's work often surprises visitors, whether from the theater community or beyond. One weekend, in 1984, for example, the arts program director of a national foundation came to Roadside's home theater in Whitesburg to evaluate the ensemble's work. As usual, the 150-seat theater was packed with more than 175 people. At the play's intermission, the foundation director was livid: "The woman to my right and the man to my left are both singing along to your original songs and sometimes completing a character's line. You've set me up, which is decidedly not in your

self-interest.” “Oh dear,” I replied, “Please pick any seat you want for the second act.” When the play ended, the foundation officer came to me and apologized, saying the same thing had happened in her new seat and that she was moved beyond words by what she had experienced. I commented to her that the Appalachian culture’s tradition of participation is a reason that it has been able to resist the forces of homogenization and commercialization seeking to bottle and sell it—for a people without a fair share of economic independence, cultural autonomy is that much more important.

After performing on tour for hundreds of economically well-off audiences, a tipping point must have been reached, for the actors found themselves cutting short or even deleting text that was not registering with these spectators. Something had back-fired, because Roadside’s aesthetic, with its concern for audience members finding their own story in the play, seeks to encourage actors to undertake such editing. As it was playing out, if enough audience members had preconceived ideas about poor and working class people that occasioned redactions critical to honoring their history and traditions, the plays could veer dangerously close to becoming a parody of their intentions. After one such performance, a company actor remarked that despite the full exertion of her will power she could feel herself becoming Ellie May Clampett, the stereotypical young hillbilly woman of television’s “Beverly Hillbillies” fame.<sup>6</sup>

Roadside’s insistence that communities presenting its plays commit to the concept of inclusion at first attained mixed results. Initially, the ensemble thought expanded audience recruitment efforts would secure its goal. Accordingly, the company developed a promotional “tool” kit that included press releases, flyers, posters, and pre-recorded radio

spots that reflected the working class origins of the coming attractions and sent it to each presenter. Roadside also developed a manual describing how best to use the promotional material and a three-month calendar outlined the timing of a model publicity campaign. On a regular schedule, a company member made friendly calls to each presenter to learn how audience recruitment was going and to help address any problems. The extra effort and expense paid off. Roadside now toured to full houses of diverse audiences, and the actors (and consequently the plays) were back in their groove. However, unexpected issues loomed.

In 1988, after months of working on promotion with the local presenter in a mid-sized Alabama town, a large crowd greeted Roadside: "This is twice as many people as show-up for our performances!" exclaimed the presenter to Roadside's tour manager. It was standing room only, and it was obvious from the racial diversity and the social signs of speech and dress that the crowd was a cross-section of the city. The actors were excited, and judging from the buzz in the auditorium, so was the audience. The quick and knowing reactions of the working class audience members helped lead other patrons through the drama. There was a prolonged standing ovation, some stormed the stage to take pictures of their families with the Roadside actors, and, most importantly, to share their own stories. The company left town thinking it surely would be invited back to continue such an inspired exchange.

Four months later, Roadside's tour manager called the presenter and said, "Haven't heard from you. I guess you want us back next season. Good for the box office!" Unexpectedly, the presenter replied he could not commit. The company's booking manager called back nine



months later and received the same answer. So, finally, on the third call, the Roadside representative said, “I can tell you’re not going to ask us to return. Why?” And the presenter said, “The play was really good. We never had such a big crowd before—or since. But our board of directors just didn’t like the way y’all talked.” Alabamans did not like the way Appalachians talked? So the Roadside tour manager said, “What do you mean?” The presenter replied, “One board member said that if we keep having those people in our audience, they might want us to start programming country music, and we can’t have that!” “Oh, I see,” the tour manager replied, and she thanked the presenter for his time.<sup>7</sup>

What had happened was that certain people did not enjoy sharing their evening with certain “other” individuals in the community who might even know more than they did about some parts of life. For those citizens, the arts are akin to their country club, a chance to get away and be with “their” kind. Paradoxically, tax-exempt status and public support was making their social class-rooted theater experience possible.

From experiences similar to the one in Alabama, Roadside’s actors began to realize their challenge on tour was greater than attracting an audience that looked like the whole community, as difficult as that could be, but was instead ensuring that everyone had an opportunity to participate in decisions about their community’s public arts and culture programming. It also was becoming clear to the company’s members that diverse community audiences, like its own audience at home, wanted to participate in the artistic experience itself, as opposed simply to consuming it as a spectator. It was with this realization in mind that Roadside’s leadership began thinking of story circles as a potent form of public participation.

## Story Circles

Roadside's original ensemble members grew up without television, immersed in a world of local narratives. That oral tradition, often in ballad form, is the most prominent feature of Appalachia's shared Scots-Irish heritage, and it has shaped the content and determined the form of the company's plays. If you have ever enjoyed the experience of sitting with friends and kin singing, spinning tales, and recounting oft-told histories, you can quickly grasp the roots of Roadside's approach to theater-making. The play's tellers sometimes carry the narrative, sometimes portray characters, and often call out a phrase in unison with lines suddenly doubling and overlapping within a general motif of call-and-response. In the company's Appalachian performance tradition, as well as in those with which its members have been invited to participate (the southern African American and Puerto Rican customs, for example), call-and-response includes the audience. The result is the rich choral effect of harmony and counterpoint that is group storytelling, whether on a front porch or in an auditorium.

Not only does oral tradition effectively generate content for building plays, but, after performances of the staged show, story circles with audience and cast participating provide a nuanced feedback loop for audience members to integrate a production's experience into their own lives, as well as for the presenting artists to deepen their understanding of their performance. As it happens, the sharing opportunities story circles represent continue the play's action into a new act, providing a way for participating community members to develop deeper individual and collective meaning of what they have experienced. Story circles also are effective at eliciting valuable feedback and understanding for performers

and thereby contributing to enriching the possibilities for presentation of plays in the future.

Based on the experience of many such public circles, Roadside's members concluded that the stories people were able to tell themselves and others, those they could imagine and understand, defined not only what they perceive to have occurred, but what they thought could be possible in their individual and collective lives (Cocke, McGarvey, Kohl, Burnham, & Quay, 1999, p. 4). In the course of communicating personal stories, difficulties in a community often rise to the surface, including issues from which its members are suffering. For example, in 1995 Roadside staged a play in a rural Montana county in which residents were bitterly divided concerning a proposal to close the jurisdiction's last one-room school and to consolidate its small high schools into one larger entity to serve all of the county's teenagers. Many students and parents supported the change, but several older members of the community were strongly opposed. Participants in story circles held after Roadside's performances turned to this controversy as their topic. At first, younger people shared stories about difficulties getting the classes they needed to get into college. Then the first older person, a woman in her eighties, began her story with, "They just don't have good fights in [our] schools like they did when I was a girl." She went on to describe the Saturday night dances at the one room schools she had experienced as a teen ager, and how some of the young men would go outside to take a nip, and a fist fight over a girl would inevitably ensue, be broken up, and the event continued. She also painted a picture of weddings held at the schools during the summer full moon so participants could waltz in the moonlight. After her story, the next teller, a younger man with teenage children, said, "I couldn't understand why you were so against getting a better education for our children. Now I see

that the old schools weren't just places to learn reading and writing, they were the heart of the community. If big consolidated schools can't be that, how can we develop heart another way?"<sup>8</sup>

Because stories are powerful and can easily be used to dominate and exploit rather than to empower and enrich and to secure collective development, Roadside's members are very formal about how they employ story circles. In essence, the group sits in a circle, and each person tells a personal story based on a mutually agreed theme. A Roadside facilitator introduces the sharing by suggesting that narratives should have characters, a setting, some aspect of conflict, and a beginning, middle, and end. No one can join a story circle late, and everyone must participate. Calculated by the amount of time allotted for the circle divided by the number of participants, each person is asked to tell a story of approximately the same length. The experience begins when the first person starts and then moves to the individual to that person's right. Even if someone tells a controversial story, there is no cross talk in response. Participants must wait to respond through their own story. As the telling moves around the circle, one may pass if not ready to share, for the opportunity to speak will come around again.

As practiced by Roadside, the story circle encourages deep listening. Naturally when the circle's theme is decided, participants immediately begin thinking about what story they are going to tell. However, facilitators suggest that they not share the narrative that first comes to mind, but rather offer a story that arises from listening to those shared by others. There is no timekeeper, as each group will create its own rhythm—for example, after listening to the preceding story, the timing of beginning one's own account is the teller's

choice. After everyone has told their story, the group reflects together, now allowing interpersonal dialogue, about what just happened. Were there common or strikingly divergent themes? Was there now a new narrative in the middle of the circle?



**Author facilitates a story circle with Jewish and Arab Israeli teenagers and Acting MFAs Illinois Shakespeare Theatre.**

Story circles engender appreciation for the unique intellectual, emotional, and spiritual qualities of each participant, and develop oral expression and listening skills. Each individual's story is a present to those in the circle, with the quality of the listening also a gift in return to the storyteller.

Informed in 1990 by some audience members that racism was once more on the rise in their southern communities, Junebug Productions, the New Orleans African-American theater that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement's Free Southern Theater, and Roadside decided to create and tour a musical play about the historical relationship between black

and white poor and working class people in the South. Roadside and Junebug had been collaborating since 1982, when Junebug director, John O’Neal, and Dudley Cocke decided to share their company’s respective plays with each other’s home audiences—one predominately white Appalachian and the other principally African American. In 1990, the two directors agreed the new play would treat the period from the slave trade and first landing of indentured servants in the U.S. to the end of the Vietnam War. To build a foundation for the drama, the two ensembles sat together in circles telling each other personal stories about their experience with race, place, and class. These narratives and the group’s discussion of their meaning helped company members better hear each other and themselves, and, as the participating artists began to understand their differences, the group was better able to assess their shared history and current circumstances. After arriving at a script that those involved thought was a genuine reflection of their experiences and testing it and revising it with their home audiences in Louisiana and Kentucky, the two companies set about touring the production, their stock in trade.

Before playing a venue, the two companies asked potential sponsors of *Junebug/Jack* whether their community was ready to think about local race and class issues. If the producers felt ready or wanted to take a chance, the combined troupe would bring the play to their town or city. As the group began traveling to communities across the South, the challenge became how to get black and white working class and poor people to attend. In the main, such folks do not gather together, much less go to the same professional theater productions (Sidford, 2011). However, those who had labored on the work believed that if they did not obtain just such an audience notwithstanding—no matter how popular the drama might be with others (and it was)—they had failed.

After exhausting the array of previously mentioned promotional strategies, including getting the word out to barbershops and bars, where politics are discussed, the *Junebug/Jack* company members in one typically animated post-performance discussion hit on an idea: Every location wishing to present the play would agree to form a racially diverse and religiously ecumenical choir to perform in the show. Reflecting each community's diversity, these choruses could include singers from African-American churches, members of predominately white congregations, performers from women's choirs, and perhaps participants from high school glee clubs. Several months before the professional actors arrived, Roadside/Junebug sent each community chorus the show's music and asked the group to designate a chorus master to conduct evening rehearsals, if they had not done so already. A few days before the opening performance, the show's director (the author, as it happened) staged the chorus into the show.

Several things happened in the course of this production process. First, the play's presenter had to begin thinking about the whole community while identifying individuals who might serve in the chorus. The singers did not volunteer to discuss race and class—they came together because they loved to sing and this professional drama looked like a good opportunity to shine. In the course of rehearsing the music, they naturally hit on a sound that had never been heard in the community, simply because all those different talents had never been joined before. Choruses did not come together consciously to sing beautifully crafted, down to earth songs about the cruelty, heartache, and paradoxes of 400 years of race and class struggle, but that is what they wound up doing anyway. Choir membership would typically increase the *Junebug/Jack* cast from a small cadre of six professionals to a group of 20 or more. Junebug and Roadside artists agreed that residents' participation only

raised the artistic quality of the production—and noted how much local talent goes unappreciated for lack of a meaningful book and finely crafted musical score!

A cross-section of the entire community was present when shows opened as a result of the engagement of the chorus and the various communities from which its members came.

Friends and family of choir members came to see the play. In addition, because the performances enabled everyone to feel confident about their traditions, audience members became eager to witness and to learn more about the *other* ways of life on offer: to experience how the African-American people sang, or how the white people sang, or what inflections young people brought to the song.

The community choir that performed *Junebug/Jack* in New Orleans in 1997 to launch a statewide tour was 32 strong. The group proceeded down the church aisle of what was once a bowling alley, the venue of that kick-off performance, singing the traditional gospel tune, “This Little Light of Mine.” The play’s musical finale encourages everyone in the auditorium to join in, and as audience members get up to sing and dance, any semblance of a division between stage and spectator seating is blurred. The actors and choir lead everyone in the finale’s syncopated chorus (Cocke, Newman, Salmons-Rue, 1993). Here’s a sample:

**Michael**

A lot of black people all over the world  
Still fighting a terrible fight  
Thinkin’ 'bout the past but lookin’ to the future  
Beginning to see the light  
History has proven that it's unacceptable  
To keep a people down  
Pain and suffering all those years  
Shackled and whipped to the ground.



Families disrupted, where is the justice?  
Millions gone to slave ship seas.  
With faith intact they broke their backs  
Three hundred years of labor for free.  
Now the only request after giving their best  
Was for forty acres and a mule  
Asking and waiting and asking again  
Still treated like a fool.  
It's been a long time since 1865  
Some changes are hard to see  
But freedom for you and freedom for me  
Everybody in equality!

**Chorus (all)**

What did they do with what they took from you,  
What did they do with mine?  
No use complaining what they took from you  
They been stealing from us all a long time.

**Ron**

For over 100 years people in the mountains  
Lived in peace and harmony  
Helping one another, living on the land  
They knowed what it meant to be free.  
Then some men from the banks, church, and government  
Men from the industry  
Took a look at the mountains, put their heads together  
said with disbelief:  
"There's something wrong with this picture here  
And there's gonna be hell to pay.  
You need money to spend, credit cards and bills  
To live the American Way."  
You can't buy my pride  
You can't sell my hope  
You can't steal my identity  
And when the air we breathe is sold a breath at a time  
Hillbillies will still be free!

**Chorus (all)** (Cocke, Newman, Salmons-Rue, 1993: 67-68)<sup>9</sup>

When the song ended, the church's preacher asked the 500 audience members to bow their heads as she led a prayer for the actors' safe keeping. This was timely because earlier that week Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke had been stirring things up in the communities Roadside and Junebug were about to visit.

**Junebug Productions and Roadside Theater  
perform *Junebug/Jack***



In the days after these performances (and in a process very similar to that the two ensembles had employed in creating the play), audience members were invited to join circles to tell personal stories about the dynamics of race and class in their community. With a newfound permission based on the common experience and trust arising from their engagement with the play, they told each other of encounters and incidents that were typically complex, hard, and emotional—and untold before in “mixed” company. The biggest impact, indeed a kind of social catharsis, created by *Junebug/Jack* during its performances from 1991-1997 did not occur during the play, but in the community member's telling and sharing of their stories after the formal performances.

## Community Cultural Development

When television starts telling a community's stories for it, when its older and younger members no longer share their lives and mass media replaces the front porch, the living room, and the local county store, what happens to a population's sense of themselves and its possibilities? This question provided the motivation for Roadside to codify and further develop its community cultural development theory and practice.

Roadside's CCD praxis, like its plays' form and content, grew out of experiences in its home community. After a 1989 performance of *Mountain Tales and Music* at a local high school in Clintwood, Virginia, the school's drama teacher asked the company's artists to help teach her class. That same year, Roadside was working with the town's Senior Citizens Center, so the troupe's members suggested to the students that they begin collecting stories from the older folks at the Center. The high school students were not initially a bit interested in this idea. Nevertheless, Roadside invited the class to a performance at the Senior Center of its play *South of the Mountain*, which is set in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the county where the performance was to occur. As the drama unfolded, the older people in attendance increasingly interrupted the actors to tell their own version of the times. This was mildly interesting to the students, whose experience was only with fourth-wall theater, but when an older lady piped up and stated, "I used to go courting around South of the Mountain, and I always hoped the car would break down on a lonely mountain road so I could smooch in the back seat," the Roadside project manager noticed the students stirred in their seats.<sup>10</sup> In the ensuing months, the company held story circles with the youths and elders and from these the students created plays combining their own and the senior

citizens' stories, which they performed around the county to full houses and standing ovations.

As this example in Virginia attests, Roadside's CCD theory and methodology are shaped by the goal of helping the host community become more inclusively and deeply aware of itself, and the story circle has proven itself effective in this regard. CCD projects can take many forms—the celebration of a local population's diverse traditions and histories through a cultural festival, or the self-identification of a particular issue to address. How a community uses Roadside's CCD process is up to those from it to decide, with the caveat that whatever the project's purpose(s) and goals, a cross section of the entire citizenry be continuously encouraged to participate as equals in it. Roadside does not solicit work in communities outside its region, believing to do so would be presumptuous. Nevertheless, when invited into a community for a CCD effort, the company begins the process of working itself out of a job, with the goal of leaving behind an inclusive group of citizens carrying on cultural projects in their own ways toward collectively identified ends.

Cultural development work is ever exciting as the residents of each community realize they have something important to say to each other and to offer to anyone who will listen. As one Western rancher put it to the author in 1992 over a beer, "We're tired of everything coming in on us. We want to send something out." CCD work is as complex as the individuals and communities that practice it and typically has many moving parts occurring simultaneously. To guide its practice, Roadside has developed a theory of change and an accompanying methodology. Both have proven useful for keeping a project on track toward its (community-defined) goals.

## Theory of Change

Effective development seeks a dynamic relationship between the individual and the group, each discovering through experience and reflection their relationship to the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of their community. As those with direct knowledge of the culture interact, individuals and therefore their communities (however defined) become more aware of themselves and more self-confident. They gain voice and agency.

Development can only be sustained when this bottom-up process of individual and collective exploration and learning continues to inspire and shape awareness and action. Conversely, when individuals, their groups, and their organizations lose touch with such broad-based cultural knowledge as the shaping force of change, development will begin to collapse. This bottom-up theory constitutes a critique of some accepted forms of progressive art making. For example, suppose an artist with a formidable reputation has an exciting idea for a performance that addresses some aspect of social justice. Funders then agree to support that individual and his or her “cutting-edge” conception, and the artist begins working with the community to realize his or her performance. The problem, from the perspective of Roadside’s theory of change, is that if the performer’s conception is not iteratively tested and reconceived by people in the community based on their individual and group knowledge, it will be launched some distance off the ground. Roadside’s members believe such efforts eventually float away without affecting the problems they seek to address. They fail because those most involved, those with the most knowledge, are

not the generative base for devising and enacting strategies to confront the perceived challenges.

## **Practice**

Roadside begins its multiple year community cultural development projects with as many of the stakeholders as are known present as possible. If a project is receiving resource support from private foundations and public agencies, they, too, must be active partners in an initiative rather than play a more typical role of stepping back until the project's conclusion, thereafter to pass judgment on its successes and failures. Instead, all stakeholders share some of the responsibility for the process, the products, and the outcomes of a cultural development effort.

As the partners get to know each other, Roadside's members emphasize a willingness to reexamine basic assumptions and test hypotheses through repeated cycles of posing questions and trying to answer them. A humble curiosity, openness to direct questions and a willingness not to know the answers—these are the qualities the Roadside CCD approach seeks to cultivate among all involved stakeholders. In an important sense, the company strives to work with all concerned to facilitate a process not only of consciousness raising concerning often latent assumptions, but also of active discernment and learning on how the community might wish to act on those once identified.

In particular, Roadside seeks to establish collective governance and consensual practice among engaged stakeholders in the pursuit of three questions linked to a process of intentional learning:

- What aspect of our community life are we trying to celebrate or transform, and why is that important?
- How are we trying to achieve this, and why is that the best strategy?
- How will we know we are succeeding; what data will provide us evidence, so we can improve the work and demonstrate its accomplishment to others?

The commonly derived answers to these concerns create shared overarching project objectives and goals. In addition, Roadside asks each partner to offer individual goals for an initiative. For example, by knowing that a public agency hopes to build its reputation among local legislators by supporting the project, project partners can better understand certain aspects of the agency's behavior and look for ways to help them achieve their individual goal. In a word, Roadside asks that all stakeholders involved in a community cultural development initiative be transparent with their partners about all the aims of their engagement—to lay their cards on the table and trust the group to respect their intentions.

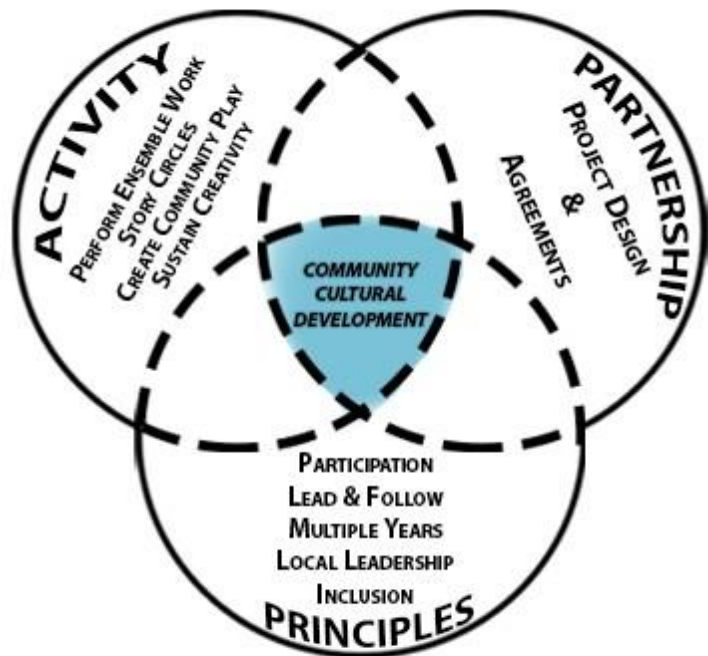
Program design is determined by a project's focus, separating what is known from what is unknown, and discerning the difference between causes and effects, root and branch.

Having agreed on a point of departure, the partners can proceed thereafter in an orderly fashion, relying on manageable cycles of action and assessment to learn together. At that point, too, the participating stakeholders can agree on their individual roles and responsibilities along with various common and individual goals and yet to be addressed concerns. Such documentation is updated as the project unfolds and is made available to all partners for guidance as efforts proceed.

If the cycles of action and assessment are producing learning among those engaged (generating knowledge, developing skills, altering attitudes, changing behaviors), the stakeholders can expect that their plan of work will evolve as the work proceeds. Flexibility is an important value. This willingness to rethink and reconfigure action plans does not absolve the partners of accountability to outside stakeholders or of the important need to develop and follow strategic roadmaps. Nonetheless, those engaged should demonstrate a readiness, indeed a desire, to revisit and reorient the strategies they are following, as new evidence is uncovered and fresh ideas are generated. As the CCD project gains momentum, Roadside’s members pay greater attention to when they should lead and when they should follow community members’ lead.

Overall, Roadside’s CCD method rests on five broad principles:

- Active participation;
- Partnerships and collaborations involving an inclusive range of community organizations;
- Local leadership;
- Knowing when to lead and when to follow; and
- Engagement over the course of at least two years.



**Roadside Theater Community Cultural Development Methodology**



The community engagement process can be represented as a Venn diagram.

Activity, Partnership, and Principles continuously inform each other, and it is this flow between and among them that creates the “sweet spot” of community cultural development. The major activities in the Roadside method do not necessarily occur as discrete events, but can be mixed and matched when warranted by stakeholder insight. Likewise, project design and partnership agreements are modified as stakeholders learn together through periodic reflection and analysis. Nonetheless, the five underpinning principles outlined above are constant throughout a project. The typical steps in which Roadside engages in its community cultural development work follow.

### **The first activity point**

The company selects one of its plays appropriate to a community cultural development residency’s goals so local residents can witness and evaluate what the theater group does. In interactive workshops following the performance, Roadside’s members explain their company’s history and share its artistic process with community members.

### **The second activity point**

Roadside’s principals themselves conduct and thereafter train others to facilitate community story circles so local residents can begin to hear and appreciate the way their stories speak to the purpose and theme of the residency. This step often becomes compelling because participants often hear new information about a common experience. From the story circles, a complex sense of a particular place begins to emerge. These stories (and songs), which are often recorded, become the basic ingredients for community celebrations that end the second phase. These events usually include potluck suppers at

which participants play music, sing, and share the stories they have now begun to craft.

Through such open yet structured programs, the community voice begins to proclaim itself.

All such celebrations are composed of many voices and Roadside asks all stakeholders to welcome new stakeholders to the process at all times.

### **The third activity point**

The community stories and songs (and sometimes dances) become the resources for creating drama relevant to a particular CCD residency's goals. Drama, by its nature, gives permission for conflict, so, for example, a play's theme might be as contentious as the effects of racism and economic inequality on the identified goal of developing a better public school system in the jurisdiction. Nascent and experienced community playwrights, producers, directors, actors, and designers use an expanding body of local expression to develop performances with residents. Roadside's members help as necessary, filling the gaps of inexperience. The focus, however, is on community assets and on citizens finding strategies to use the arts to address compelling local claims. Roadside does not direct these efforts, but instead seeks to catalyze local artists in their shared efforts to address them themselves.

### **The fourth activity point**

After a drama is up and running, Roadside suggests ways for those involved from the community to recognize and honor their efforts. The company's members also help broker creation of an infrastructure to establish a community-based theater or other development organization. Roadside's principals introduce their colleagues to the national network of artists and communities engaged in similar explorations. Now the population that has hosted the CCD residency for several years or longer creates its own means to continue

exploring its story in public. Meanwhile, the community cultural development field gains a new peer organization.<sup>11</sup>

## **Choteau, Montana**

As previously mentioned, each Roadside community development project is guided by a partnership agreement drawn up in the early stages of the effort and modified by consensus as the initiative develops. How this process occurs was exemplified in the company's collaboration with members of the ranching and farming community of Choteau, Montana from 1992-1995. The project was sparked by the community's concern for the loss of its young people to the cities. State economic development money provided initial funding for the effort. Here is the "Mountaineers – Cowfolks" agreement that served as a touchstone for the three years of collaboration between Roadside and the town.

### We agree:

- Economic development and cultural development go hand in hand.
- The project's process and products will witness a commitment to place. They will be grounded in the local and specific, which, when rendered faithfully and creatively, can affect people anywhere.
- The new plays will be given their voice by the community from which they arise. The artists will be part of the culture from which the work is drawn. The people who are the subjects of the work will be part of its development from inception through presentation. Their stories and histories will inform the work; their feedback during the creation process will shape it. The audience will not be consumers of, but participants in the performance.
- The traditional and indigenous are integral to rural life and valued for their ability to help us maintain continuity with the past, respond to the present, and prepare for the future. Thus, the relationship to the traditional and indigenous will be dynamic, not fixed.
- The project will strive to be inclusive in its producing practices. The work will be made in partnership with community organizations. Activities will be held in meeting places where the entire community feels welcome. Any tickets will be affordable.
- The collaboration and exchange will recognize that management structures and business practices are value-laden, affecting the mission, goals, and creative process.

Through its structures and practices, the project will endeavor to support broad participation, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.

- The project will be consciously linked to the struggles for cultural, social, economic, and political equity for all people in the community. Although the project offers hope and joy, it also recognizes that advocating for equity often meets resistance, and that such resistance, when articulated, is an opportunity for positive community change (Cocke, Newman, Salmons-Rue, 1993, p. 80-81).

Living up to such agreements is part of the challenge of this form of art-based community development. For example, it might at first appear to be relatively simple to address the stipulation in the above agreement that, “Activities will be held in meeting places where the entire community feels welcome.” But, in fact, most localities do not have a public performance space where everyone feels welcome. This can lead directly into the aesthetic nightmare of the “caf-a-gym-a-torium,” which is where the Choteau project was headed once several community leaders reported that the areas’ churches were contested spaces. Then someone suggested the town’s small public park with its amphitheater as a suitable “neutral” venue, and everyone quickly agreed. About two weeks before the performances, however, the project’s Blackfoot tribe’s Native American partners informed everyone that the facility the production was to use had been built on their ancestral burial ground. There was only one thing to do: ask for their permission to perform there, which they formally gave with a traditional blessing ceremony after the audience had gathered and before the performances began.

Reflecting on the four-year Choteau project, farmer (and participant) Ralph Paulus concluded, “You have to feel good about yourself to stand up for what you believe in. The problem with democracy is that there’s a risk, you have to stand up and shoot your mouth off once in a while. ... You have to have guts to make democracy work.” (Montana American Festival Project, 1992-95, p. 5)

## Arizona State University

As part of its Arizona State University's (ASU) three-year (1997-1999) CCD project, "Untold Stories," Roadside created a performance (1998) that brought those involved together with two groups of Native American dancers (Zuni and Pima) and a popular Chicano solo artist.<sup>12</sup> The production occurred in Scottsdale's Kerr Cultural Center, which had been built as a private concert hall for Mrs. Kerr and was now owned by ASU. An issue with complimentary tickets was the first warning sign that Kerr management was feeling uncomfortable about hosting the event. About an hour before the performance, Roadside's artistic director noticed that there were 10 or so people waiting outside in the cold, and when he tried to invite them into the lobby, Kerr's management said that such was strictly forbidden for another 30 minutes. The Roadside company member recognized that the majority of those in the queue had earlier been cast members in the popular play the troupe had developed with ASU's "classified" employees—maintenance personnel, kitchen staff, secretaries, and receptionists—entitled, *Highly Classified*. The production had been supported by the workers' union, which arranged with the university's administration for compensatory time for its members to participate in its creation and performances. Unsure of Kerr etiquette, cast members of the *Highly Classified* production had arrived more than an hour early in case "adjustments" needed to be made. Even as the time arrived to open the doors, management refused to do so until one of the performers tuning his banjo cleared the stage. Unconcerned with a fourth wall, Roadside cast members often choose to tune instruments and to banter with the audience before a performance begins.

Serving as the event's producer and director, the Roadside member next noticed that the foster-care children from the Boys and Girls Club, who had been part of the "Untold Stories" project from its inception and who arrived excited and all dressed up, were being directed to bleachers in the far back of the auditorium, furthest from the stage. Kerr management said this was a strategy aimed at being able to eject them quickly should they act-up. In direct contradistinction, however, in Appalachian, Native-American, and Chicano cultures, the elderly and the children are given places of honor in the front. At Kerr, the best seats were reserved for patrons with season tickets. They were down on floor level in an odd reversal of what would have been the lowly social pit in Shakespearean times. No other audience members were allowed in that section.

As the hour arrived for the performance to begin, the theater was alive as the approximately 100 Latino, Native-American, and other newcomers to the Kerr Cultural Arts Center hugged each other and exchanged news. It was indeed a happening. Five minutes after the appointed performance hour, a Kerr staff member ordered the play to begin immediately, and when the Roadside director replied that it already had, the staffer suggested that he was making fun of her. And so the evening played itself out as a contest between the accepted protocols of behavior of the majority of the audience in league with the performers and those of the venue's regular patrons, which were consonant with those of Kerr's management.

The evening ended with a traditional southwestern Native American "Split Circle" dance. As the boys and girls from the bleachers rushed down to participate and were joined by almost everyone else, the Kerr's regular patrons remained seated. The joyous dance

swirled around them. With their refusal to join the fun, these audience members did not appear to comprehend that they were in a public university's community-oriented space and that the central purpose of the "Untold Stories Festival" was to bring different people together to share their common humanity.

## **Conclusion**

As the Arizona State University story illustrates, CCD work can provoke a clash of values, and its practitioners must address the many ways that those holding power will seek to preserve their hold on it while also grappling with how community members relate to those efforts. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has observed that in post-colonial Africa, the censorship of his plays was not aimed at his text, but at how he wanted those dramas produced. He encountered an insistence on maintaining colonial production protocols: "The struggle may take the form of the state's intervention in the content of the artist's work—what goes on by the name of censorship—but the main arena of struggle is the performance space: its definition, delimitation and regulation" (Thiong'o, 1997, pp. 11-30).

While cultural development practice requires focus and a willingness to confront issues as they arise, its secret weapon is the joy of individual and community expression. Because CCD locates itself in a specific population's intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features, the stakes of identity could not be higher. Again, as Ngugi wa

Thiong'o has observed:

The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It

makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency, and a collective death wish (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 3).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirmed a simple and profound concept: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (United Nations, 1948, Article 27, Section 1). This principle of cultural equity has always animated Roadside's activity in community, whether at home in Appalachia, on tour, or in extended residence.

Often described as the theater wing of the civil rights movement, the Free Southern Theater (FST) was founded in 1963 at Tougaloo College in Mississippi by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members, including Roadside's steadfast collaborator, John O'Neal. In 1985, O'Neal held a funeral, "a valediction without mourning," in New Orleans for the FST. Snaking from Congo Square down Dumaine Street into Treme, the relic-filled FST coffin, its pall bearers, and its gathering of followers shimmied and shook to the syncopated beat of a traditional brass marching band. People came to the funeral from struggling communities in different regions of the U.S. to perform and witness theater's power to address human rights—and to think critically about social justice. At the weeklong "valediction without mourning," Roadside offered *South of the Mountain*, which tells the story of the time in an Appalachian family when hillside farming and barter gave way to coal mining and the company store. *South of the Mountain* is the fourth play in Roadside's Appalachian history cycle. Here is part of one of its songs:



Winter time in the mountains,  
And the snow is falling down.  
Daddy's loading the pickup truck,  
Hauling bakker into town.  
There'll be new shoes for me and Carrie,  
And for Momma, a new gown.  
Peppermint sticks and orange slices  
When Christmas rolls around.

(Chorus)  
We believed in the family,  
And the Old Regular Baptist Church.  
We believed in John L. for a while  
'Till things couldn't get much worse.  
They tell me times was harder then,  
And I remember that for a while.  
But I remember the way my Daddy laughed  
And the way my Mamma smiled.

Daddy would come home from work in the mines  
With his shirt froze to his arms.  
And every time my Momma would cry,  
He'd say, "It ain't gonna do me no harm."  
You know a man's got to work for a living today  
And come spring I want to build a new barn.  
But a man can't raise a family no more  
On a rocky hillside farm.

(Chorus) (Roadside Theater, 1992)



**Roadside Theater performs *South of the Mountain***

The year two thousand and thirteen marked the 50th anniversary of the Free Southern Theater, and was the occasion for another FST reunion in New Orleans. Artists and activists of different ages and backgrounds joined with civil rights veterans, who had put their lives on the line for freedom in the 1960s. The commemoration, again organized by O’Neal and FST’s organizational successor Junebug Productions, made the author think about what a 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic theater might looklike, and the role community cultural development could play in such a movement. Those who understand power understand the power of culture and its devised expression, art. They understand that those who control the means of cultural production control the story a community or nation tells itself.<sup>13</sup> Roadside’s community cultural development practice seeks to unmask power so that it may be shared in service to the ideal of a cultural democracy in which all individuals, their communities, and their cultures have an equal opportunity to develop—and inevitably to cross-pollinate.

Are there any present signs of a new populist democratic movement, akin to the labor and civil rights movements of the last century, in which the practice of community cultural development can be an actor? One can be sure that resistance to such a movement by those relatively few currently holding inordinate amounts of power will be swift, unilateral, and, if necessary, brutal. Those in power will be counting on unwitting allies—those who can be riled up by the red herring of some enemy out to destroy them, and those within progressive ranks who can be co-opted by being told that it is about them as exceptional individuals rather than about collective struggle. As Kentucky writer and farmer Wendell Berry has observed, “... individual genius of the modern kind never has courage equal to its essential loneliness, and so it commits itself passionately to clichés of individualism and a

uniformity of innovation, ignorant of what precedes it, destructive of what it ignores”  
(Berry, 1987: 45).

We know that even movements originating from good intentions can become problematic as unintended consequences mount, and that power—even when used with the best of intentions—corrupts. The antidote to such occurring or to co-option by those in power is vigorous critical discourse in which citizens agree to build and sharpen each other’s perspectives, even as they hold each other accountable for their collective decisions. Presently, this iterative discourse is almost non-existent in the nonprofit arts sector and in communities across the United States, so plenty continues to go wrong. But struggle is an alternative to despair, and cultural development can energize communities, making them more conscious of their capacity to transform themselves on the basis of their own people.

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## Notes

There is an abundance of documentation including multimedia and writing on Roadside Theater's website, <http://roadside.org>. All unattributed quotations are from the author's memory.

<sup>1</sup> Cecil James Sharp (1859-1924), the founding father of the folklore revival in England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, recorded and published England's traditional dances and music. A quotation from Cecil James Sharp's diary entry of August 27, 1916, when he was collecting in the Appalachian Mountains: "Last week I went to Hot Springs, where I got thirty beautiful songs from a single woman. The collecting goes on apace, and I have now noted 160 songs and ballads.

Indeed, this field is a far more fertile one upon which to collect English folk songs than England itself. The cult of singing traditional songs is far more alive than it is in England or has been for fifty years or more."

<sup>2</sup> Roadside Theater received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts Program in 1979, 1981, 1983, 1990, and 1997 (Heritage and Preservation).

<sup>3</sup> The five plays in the cycle are: *Mountain Tales and Music* (1974), *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* (1976), *Pretty Polly* (1979), *South of the Mountain* (1982), and *Leaving Egypt* (1987).

<sup>4</sup> Sidford, H. (2011) *Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy*, National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy, p.1. ([http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing Arts Culture Social Change.pdf](http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing%20Arts%20Culture%20Social%20Change.pdf)).

The Wallace Foundation (then the Lila Wallace—Reader's Digest Fund), a national U.S. philanthropy funding education and audience development for the arts, commissioned the firm AMS Planning and Research to conduct a six-year (1991-1996) independent study of Wallace's performing arts grantees' audience demographics. According to the study, Roadside Theater's audience was an anomaly: 68% of its national audiences were comprised of those with incomes under \$50,000, and 27% of those had incomes of \$20,000 or less.

<sup>5</sup> Script ad-lib was excerpted from video of a 1986 *Pretty Polly* performance at Cleveland Technical College, Shelby, North Carolina. The video in VHF format has not been digitized.

<sup>6</sup> "A nouveau riche hillbilly family moves to Beverly Hills and shakes up the privileged society with their hayseed ways." The Beverly Hillbilly is an American sitcom originally broadcast for nine seasons on CBS 1962-1971, starring Buddy Ebsen, Irene Ryan, Donna Douglas, Max Baer, Jr., Raymond Bailey, and Nancy Kulp. (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055662/>).

<sup>7</sup> Conversation noted on the 1988 performance producing sheet by the tour manager, Donna Porterfield, and confirmed orally 2013 by Porterfield.

<sup>8</sup> Story noted on the 1995 producing sheet of the tour manager, Donna Porterfield, and confirmed orally in 2013 by Porterfield.

<sup>9</sup> A digitized copy is available on Roadside Theater's website (<http://roadside.org/asset/book-ground-grassroots-theater-historical-contemporary-perspective?unit=245>).

<sup>10</sup> Story noted on the 1989 producing sheet of the project manager, Donna Porterfield, and confirmed orally in 2014 by Porterfield.

<sup>11</sup> Idiwanan An Chawe, the first Zuni language theater, was born of this process (1995). The first 17 years of the Roadside Theater—Idiwanan An Chawe collaboration is documented in *Journeys Home: Revealing a Zuni—Appalachia Collaboration* (2002), D. Cocks, D. Porterfield, and E. Wemytewa, editors. Zuni, NM: Zuni A:shiwí Publishing. A digital copy is available on Roadside Theater's website (<http://roadside.org/asset/book-journeys-home-revealing-zuni-appalachia-collaboration?unit=73>).

<sup>12</sup> Arizona State University's Public Events' 1998-1999 season featured the "Untold Stories Festival: Celebrating Campus and Community," which was dedicated to stories which connected communities by helping them see each other and themselves from new perspectives. The undertaking was a joint project of ASU and the American Festival Project, a multicultural alliance of a dozen artists and performing arts companies from across the US, of which Roadside was a founding member. Roadside worked with: ASU's classified staff (secretaries, grounds keepers, cleaning crews, maintenance engineers) and an ASU Communications class to create a performance script, "Highly Classified," from the life stories of the staff, which was performed by classified staff in fall 1998; State Police Officers assigned to work at the ASU campus to create a play, "Police Stories," that was performed by Police Officers in April 1998; and the Metropolitan Boys and Girls Club and the Phoenix Theater's Cookie Company to create a script that was performed energetically by Club members in April 1998. Roadside also performed in collaborations with Idiwanan An Chawe of Zuni New Mexico, Junebug Productions, local artist Zarco Guerrero, and student dancers from the Gila River Reservation.

<sup>13</sup> The author wrote more about this topic in, "What is America? What is an American Theater," in Todd, L., ed. (2013), *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, New York: Theatre Communications Group. It is an underlying theme in many of the author's articles (<http://roadside.org/program/articles>).

## About the Book

***Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, practices, and Dilemmas*** addresses the growing number of communities adopting arts – and culture-based development methods to influence social change. Providing community workers and planners with strategies to develop arts policy that enriches communities and their residents, this collection critically examines the central tensions and complexities in arts policy, paying attention to issues of gentrification and stratification.

Including a variety of case studies from across the United States and Canada, these success stories and best-practice approaches cross many media and present strategies to design appropriate policy for unique populations.

Edited by Max O. Stephenson, Jr. and A. Scott Tate of Virginia Tech, *Arts and Community Change* presents 10 chapters from artistic and community leaders: essential reading for students and practitioners in economic development and arts management asking what is the role of the arts in community change initiatives.

**From the Editors' Introduction:**

Roadside Theater and its artistic director, Dudley Cocke, have a long history and a prominent place in the field of community arts. Headquartered in central Appalachia, Roadside is a small professional company that places community cultural development at the core of its mission. This commitment is demonstrated in a number of ways, perhaps none more significantly than the theater company's decision to perform only in communities that contractually commit to bring together an inclusive mix of the areas of the population for its performances and workshops. In Chapter 7, Cocke discusses how the arts may be especially powerful as a mechanism for engaging historically marginalized populations, wherever these may be located. Roadside Theater has also developed and tested a number of methods, especially story circles, that engage community members in workshop settings and through which formative stories of personal identity and community experience can be shared and common understanding forged.