

## Roadside Theater tour is a cultural exchange

By Catherine Zaiser  
STAFF WRITER

**B**y 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 DeBoard 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:

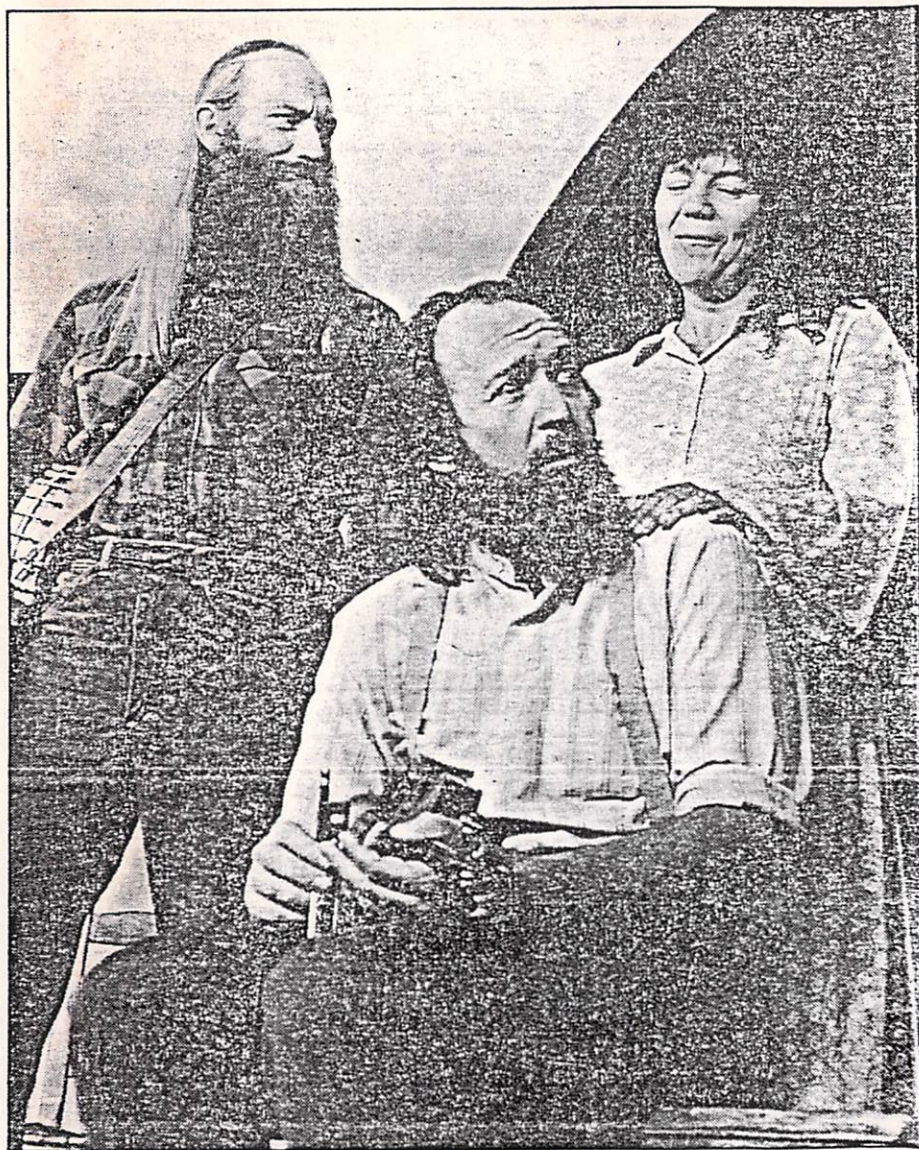
### SEPTEMBER

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.



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.