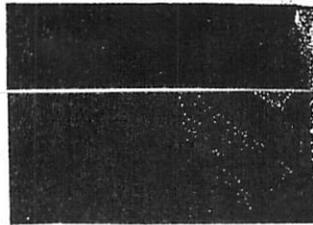


► BY GAYLE STAMLER



RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE

What was it about Roadside Theater's *Leaving Egypt* that held the cosmopolitan audience at Cornell spellbound for the more than two hours? The piece, which takes place in Appalachia in 1969, is a simple story about a family — the grandfather who follows the old ways, the granddaughter recently returned from hard times in a midwestern city, and a nephew just back from combat duty in Viet Nam. All are trying to deal with each other, and with the impending loss of the family homeplace. The deputy sheriff is just down the road, serving property condemnation papers so

a corporation can claim the land. That piece of information becomes a kind of clothesline on which the characters hang stories about their lives, the past and their folklore. It seems a thin cord on which to tie together a full evening of theater.

But they had our intimate attention, no doubt in part because most of us could bring

personal stakes to the matter of losing family digs and fighting corporate sharks. But there's much more than that.

Two years ago, shortly after seeing Roadside Theater's production of *Pretty Polly*, I spoke with one of the company's mainstay actors, Tommy Bledsoe, about what made this theater important to regional and wider-than-regional audiences.

"It's community-based," he said. "This isn't community theater. That's something else. This is based in the life of the people here."

Could he take this further?

"Our theater has a context. Context-less culture is like sexuality with whores, male or female. There is no continuity — just arousal,

titillation, no relationship, nothing that really matters."

But we were still not at the heart of what makes Roadside resonate. Then Bledsoe found it. "It's deep memories," he said. "What we do is ceremonies, folk ceremonies. The stories connect with old, forgotten feelings and responses. And the stories are important."

"But what is also important is telling them directly to the audience, with nothing in between. Our eyes and theirs touch. Makes us do not so much performances but story rituals, and ritual moves us to new states."

"If the spirit is right, you suddenly remember — remember the deep memories, stuff that is long buried, prohibited. You remember at last the stuff that really matters."

What was being remembered at the performance in Ithaca?

Eureka Theater director Richard Seyd once commented on the thaw between the Soviet Union and Reagan's United States:

"It brought tears to many eyes, because suddenly there was a memory of hope. The future was possible. Fear lifted, and after forty years we suddenly remembered what it was to live without a gun at the head."

Deep memories. A spellbinding story from Tommy about Viet Nam.

Deep memories. An account by Kim Neal Cole of how empty was the life of a hill-country girl misplaced in the city.

Deep memories. Ron Short spins a yarn — is it a yarn! — about a bottomless pit far within a cave far within a mountain, where all evil can be thrown and dispatched.

Deep memories. They're what Roadside is after. If the resounding response at the end of the evening — as at so many of the festival events — was any indication, we were all remembering deeply as a temporary, but very real and nurtured, community. ■

— Doug Paterson

Roadside Theater
in performance



Dan Carraro