

ARTS/ENTERTAINMENT

Stage: Tales of the Hills, By a Kentucky Troupe

By MEL GUSSOW

SOUTH OF THE MOUNTAIN is a warm-hearted collage of back-country tales and biscuits-and-gravy music, written by Ron Short and performed by the author, Tom Bledsoe and Nancy Jeffrey. This presentation of Kentucky's touring Roadside Theater opens the Dance Theater Workshop series "I Got a Story You Ought to Hear: New Experiences in Narrative Theater." The homespun show is as comforting as a quilt, but it is a little threadbare as an evening of theater. It might be equally effective on a phonograph record as in a live performance.

The tales cover two generations of Mr. Short's family in Appalachia and deal, as the author says, with "meeting up, getting married, starting a family," and, by indirection, with the effect of industrialization on a pastoral environment. At the root is a shared love of the land.

People endure without benefit of modern conveniences. A rare brush with technology occurs when the youngest of eight children (played by Mr. Short) volunteers for the Civilian Conservation Corps and encounters, for the first time, such amenities as indoor plumbing and the radio. Eventually, of course, he must return to the rustic demands of the farm.

Meandering through Mr. Short's family album, the evening is most evocative in its moments of bucolic humor, as in reminiscences about Bristol, Va.-Tenn., a border town in which the main street is bisected by

The Hills of Home

SOUTH OF THE MOUNTAIN, music and story by Ron Short; directed by Dudley Cocke and Mr. Short; lighting design by Dave Feldman and Phil Sandstrom; told by Tom Bledsoe, Nancy Jeffrey and Mr. Short. Presented by Dance Theater Workshop's Economy Tires Theater, in association with Appalshop Inc. At 219 West 19th Street.

"a dotted line," with a state on each side.

On stage, the trio tries to recreate the informality of an at-home entertainment. Direction, credited to Dudley Cocke and Mr. Short, is minimal. The three actors simply chat with the audience, play assorted characters and intersperse their conversation with music. Mr. Short is the soft-spoken narrator who also plays the guitar and violin. Mr. Bledsoe, as long-bearded as a prophet, strums a banjo and justifies his self-description as a "dancing fool," at one point drawing a woman from the audience into a fast-fiddling high step. With her sweet country voice, Miss Jeffrey ably carries the musical burden of the evening.

Enhancing "South of the Mountain" there is an exhibition of photographs by Wendy Ewald in the theater lobby. Miss Ewald pictures three generations of stoical Appalachian women, contemporary equivalents of Dorothea Lange's portraits of migrant workers. One can read in their eyes — and in their accompanying personal statements transcribed by the photographer — the toll of a quick-aging, elemental life, an aspect of Appalachia that is hinted at in Mr. Short's unpretentious anthology of mountain memories.