

'Reach' is tribute to farmer poet, people he loved

By Dan Hulbert
STAFF WRITER

Hazel Farmer, a Blairsville, Ga., widow who performs in "The Reach of Song: An Appalachian Drama," was late to a recent rehearsal: She had to shoot a copperhead in her garden.

Tom DeTitta, producer-playwright of the historical piece about local poet Byron Herbert Reece — now in its fifth summer staging — wasn't put out by her light tardiness.

"That was great," he says, "that's what I've always wanted in the play — people who live the mountain life."

"It was a dangerous proposition to come in and say, 'We're going to write the story of the mountains,'" continues the 33-year-old playwright, a native New Yorker and Duke University graduate who settled in Murphy, N.C., several years ago. "So I built the story by interviewing people around here. I'm glad I can ask them, 'Is this right?'"

David Hyatt, who plays the ever-hyperbolic Lyin' Zach, believes "Reach" gets it right. The 4-year-old Brasstown, Ga., mail carrier says the Decoration Day scene — in which townsfolk feast and festoon the gravestones of loved ones — stirs fond memories. "We'd bring the church benches outside and line them up to hold the food," he says. "For a 30 yards, seemed like, something new to eat with each step."

"Reach" has enjoyed a surprising number of full houses for being so far off the beaten theatrical track, in the pavilion-like Anderson Music Hall of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds. It's especially surprising for that Mr. DeTitta jokingly describes as a "big, populist production about a recluse poet who



The poetry of Byron Herbert Reece inspired "The Reach of Song," a drama set and performed in Georgia's mountains.

committed suicide."

Reece was known as "the farmer poet" because even after his work gained national exposure in the late 1940s and '50s, he worked a hardscrabble patch of corn in a valley outside of Blairsville, barely able to support himself and his ailing parents. His gaunt, Gregory Peck-ian looks added to his mystique. Fiddlin' Howard Cunningham, the production's featured musician who's lived in Hiawassee, Ga., most of his life, heard Reece

read his poetry at nearby Young Harris College and remembers "the burdened look of the man."

"You had the sense of great loneliness," continues the Nashville fiddler, "but also great compassion."

Reece's poetry, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1949, was spare and direct, deceptively simple but never simplistic. Its plaintive yearning is even more haunting, perhaps, in light of his suicide at age 40.

As editor of the Blairsville-

THEATER PREVIEW

"The Reach of Song: An Appalachian Drama"

8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through July 31.
\$5-\$12. Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds,
Route 76, Hiawassee. 800-262-7664.

based North Georgia News in the '80s, the much-traveled Mr. DeTitta discovered the poetry, and was "moved by its powerful sense of place, maybe because I've never had that sense more than I do in these mountains."

He found a sympathetic ear when he took his "crazy idea" for a play and grant proposal to the Georgia Mountains Regional Development Commission. Commission director Sam Dayton was a student of Reece's at Young Harris in the 1950s. He not only set the wheels in motion for "Reach" to receive state funding as Georgia's Official Historic Drama, he also provided a key piece to the puzzle of the poet's profile.

"Sam said, 'Reece could be sitting in a room with 100 people and still look alone,'" the playwright says. "The image of that haunted face guided me through the writing of the play."

Indeed, Mr. DeTitta's Reece (Don Baker, founder of two theaters in the Virginia Blue Ridge) is part of, and apart from, his community. He's seen with bonneted quilters, bib-jeaned whittlers and churchgoers at a fire-and-brimstone sermon. He's seen brooding over the composition of his lines, but finding solace in the beauties of nature.

Fittingly, the Music Hall — overlooking Lake Chatuge and Brasstown Bald, the highest peak in Georgia — lets playgoers experience firsthand the source of the poet's inspiration.

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LEISURE

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PHILIP HOLLAND/STAGE

THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

*'The Reach of the Song: The Soul of the Mountains' has a new look for 1995—
and a new home at Young Harris College. The historic drama draws inspiration
from the writings of plowman poet Dynon Herbert Rice,
who lived and died in the fertile valleys of the southern Appalachians.*

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