

Entertainment

Barter Playhouse's 'Calling On Lou'

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Times-News
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Reopening the Barter Playhouse in Abingdon with the premiere production of *Calling On Lou* is as natural as the hills and hollows of Appalachia.

With Barter actress Cleo Holladay as the voice, *Calling On Lou* is a one-woman show in which Abingdon writer Lou Crabtree's poems and stories are brought to life through the magic of theater.

Portraying a friend of the writer-teacher-wife and mother, Miss Holladay enters the stage setting of Crabtree's home. On finding that she's not there, the actress proceeds to tell us about this woman who taught school for 38 years and was a "solitary, midnight writer."

From poems like "All the Little Birdies and Beasties" to the concluding "Last Party" by Crabtree, the two-act show is a

journey through the culture of Appalachia and universal themes about women.

Life in Smith Creek, the writer's homeplace, is told early on in the poems, "Smith Creek" and "Smith Creek II," subtitled "Feeling Bad about Writing Smith Creek I."

Our visitor finds Crabtree's poems and stories written on papers throughout the house — in an old trunk, on the kitchen table and elsewhere. With appropriate transitional dialogue in the 90-minute show, Miss Holladay reads (with polished interpretation and believability) a goodly portion of what Crabtree has written about her native



CLEO HOLLADAY

Southwest Virginia. Some poems and stories are funny, some are sad — even tragic — while others portray the simple, but wonderful things about life in Appalachia.

Crabtree, we soon realize, is a

wordsmith of the highest order. Her words not only leap from the page as one reads her *Sweet Hollow*, but they ring from the stage in listenable fashion, too.

And no other actress probably could breathe life into those words quite like Miss Holladay does.

Especially memorable in Act 1 are Miss Holladay's presentations of "Holy Spirit" and "The Miracle in Sweet Hollow" from Crabtree's book, *Sweet Hollow*. The first story is that of Old Rellar, a woman who had 13 miscarriages, named each one of them and buried each on a hillside near her home. "Miracle in Sweet Hollow" is a fantasy about a family Christmas in Appalachia, which the actress advises: "All you need to enjoy it is a sense of wonder."

Act 2 takes on a decidedly different tone with Crabtree's writings on modern-day husbands, a story about a brother's reaction to his older sister's

boyfriend, and the write-ups on success made an interview with Gruner Lee Smith.

In that interview, Cleo also talks of how she should "get outside" or by involvement in work person loves, or through another person. In the moments, this Appalachian reveals a deep interest about life and living that simple as it is — is applicable to everyone.

Calling on Lou is presented at the newly renovated Playhouse with a backdrop of black and white photos of women at work and at play, to David Richardson, David and Bill McKee, and casts of female torsos from artist Nancy Garretson's "Six Figures of Women."

Unlike some biographical plays that might be stylized,



Cleo Holloday (left) and Lou Crabtree

'Calling On Lou' Viewed By Author

By CHRIS PHILLIPS

Lou Crabtree sat a few seats away from the rest of the audience as she watched Cleo Holloday in her solo performance of "Calling On Lou," a play based on Ms. Crabtree's writings.

She gazed intently at Ms. Holloday as she read a very well-chosen mix of her short stories and poetry. It was impossible to tell what Ms. Crabtree thought of the play; she didn't smile really, though a flicker of one seemed to appear now and then.

It certainly must have been enjoyable to have such a fine actress as Cleo Holloday show off her ability at storytelling and bring her stories to life at the Barter Playhouse in Abingdon.

And, as soon as the play was over, the question was put to Ms. Crabtree: How did you like it?

"I thought it was . . . it was . . ."
Neat?

"Yes, that's a good word.
Neat."

And it was neat.

Ms. Crabtree's writings certainly don't need to be read or acted out loud to be thoroughly enjoyed, but an oral rendition of her works didn't detract from them either.

Almost all the stories and poems

Ms. Holloday read dealt with the central themes of life - love, birth, death, aging and life itself.

For anyone who hasn't had the chance to snuggle up in their favorite chair and read some of Ms. Crabtree's work, "Calling on Lou" is the perfect opportunity to do so. You don't regret it.

Ms. Holloday played a friend of Ms. Crabtree's, and through that character was able to tell how the noted author, whose book "Sweet Hollow" received plaudits from the New York Times Book Review, began her career and relate why writing is so important, indeed vital, to her life.

One of the most intriguing short stories Ms. Holloday read was "Old Keller," which was about a woman of that name who had thirteen miscarriages.

Ms. Holloday's character recalled a time when she asked Lou Crabtree what she'd do if she no longer was allowed to write. Ms. Crabtree, who "never learned to read, I always knew how," replied, "Well, you know, I'd just have to sneak." That's how much she loves her craft.

And her writings reflect that love, which makes viewing "Calling On Lou" a must for everyone.