Jo Carson

By ASHLEA RAMEY

Jo Carson prides herself on being one of the only writers to “live where they started out;” so much so, in fact, that she lives in the same East Tennessee cottage where she grew up.

After graduating from East Tennessee State University with a speech and theatre degree in 1963, Carson spent a brief sojourn in New York City, believing the relocation was necessary to be a true artist. However, homesickness for Appalachia quickly overcame her, and she returned home.

For the next few years, Carson worked at Broadside TV, producing educational local history stories. However, in 1972, the station shut down after the FCC shifted regulations. From then, she wrote and performed with the Road Company Theater Group, and performed over 600 of what she calls “people pieces,” short character sketches of people she observed around her hometown.

Carson’s first publishing success came after over 20 years as a struggling artist, when in 1989 she published her first book, *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet*. The book is a collection of the vignettes she performed with the Road Company, many of which were overheard in and around her “beloved J.C:” Johnson City, TN.

Following *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet*, Carson’s first play, “Daytrips,” was produced, following the story of a family dealing with an Alzheimer’s-afflicted matriarch. Many critics hailed it as simultaneously hilarious and compassionate, and it ultimately received the prestigious Kesserling Award. Several of her other plays have also received awards from the Center for Appalachian Studies and the Kentucky Foundation for Women.

The success of “Daytrips” encouraged Carson, who then wrote her award-winning plays “Preacher with a Horse to Ride” and “Little Chicago,” as well as a commissioned piece on Davy Crockett titled “The Bear Facts.” She also completed the play “Whispering to Horses,” which was inspired by her real-life struggles with a challenging mount.

“Whispering to Horses” and “Daytrips” also function as metaphors for Carson’s home life, which plays a strong role in many of her works as she strives to portray the unique experience of growing up in a Southern home. Many of her critics have cited her impressive ability to relate Appalachian experiences and temperaments to a wider audience.

Between plays, Carson also completed a work of short stories: *The Last of “The Waltz Across Texas” and other Stories*, as well as several children’s books, *Pulling My Leg, You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You*, and *The Great Shaking*, which explored the effects of the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812.

Carson’s great skill—regionalism—is constantly at the core of

“All my work fits in my mouth. I write performance material no matter what else the pieces get called, and whether they are for my voice or other characters’ voices ... they are first to be spoken aloud.”
her work. She started a series named Alternate ROOTS, where she’s helped over 30 communities produce plays based on their local oral history, most recently the play “Higher Ground,” for Harlan, KY. One play, “Swamp Gravy,” originally produced for Colquitt, GA, was eventually performed at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

The community plays are one of Carson’s favorite projects, as she feels they have a “true relevance in the community,” and can even change lives. To supplement those changes and growths, Carson recently released *Spider Speculations: A Physics and Biophysics of Storytelling*, which further expounds on the dynamics and effects of storytelling.

Her devotion to storytelling is also evident in her latest one-woman play, “Liars, Thieves and Other Sinners on the Bench,” which has been performed across the South and met with acclaim. She also utilized her storytelling expertise her earlier book, *Teller Tales: Histories*, published in 2007.

National Public Radio also employs her thick Appalachian accent and folksy manner as over the last decade, she has been a frequent *All Things Considered* commentator. There, she performs her people pieces and dispenses nuggets of backwoods wisdom.

Not all of Carson’s works come to fruition. She cites one “near-failure,” when she collected over 1,500 pages of oral histories in the North. While the oral history formula works with her Alternate ROOTS projects, she quickly discovered an upsetting difference between Southern and Northern narration.

“People talked about events, but never actually narrated,” Carson once said. “After that experience, I try to stay south of the Mason-Dixon Line; the South knows how to narrate a story.”

Another difficulty with narration resulted in Carson’s only “flat-out failure.” She was commissioned to write a scripted based on a town’s experience with the Ku Klux Klan, but in collecting the stories, the town proved difficult. In order to avoid controversial topics, the locals only gave watered-down versions of events, and prevented Carson from understanding the true heart of the story. Then, to add insult to injury, the funding company’s theater told Carson they may never produce the script. Frustrated, Carson quit the project.

In her spare time, Carson, who is single, takes her horses for trail rides in the fire roads of the East Tennessee mountains. There, she can explore the mountains she so loves, while brainstorming her next projects. Carson readily gives in to the power of the Appalachian scenery, “I have comfort here. I can take risks here.”