

Theater reviews: *Woody Sez*

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By [Perry Tannenbaum](#)

Named after the 28th American president *before* he was elected later in 1912, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was the Okie son of two blue-dog Democrats, coming to maturity at a time when Dustbowl Oklahoma was becoming the spiritual Jerusalem of the nation's dispossessed. The term Okie widened to embrace all the migrant workers who streamed westward during the Great Depression in search of work. Woody Guthrie was swept up into that wave while he polished his skills as a songwriter and a folksinger, ultimately becoming the troubadour voice of those Okies.

So it isn't too shabby that Charlotte is the second U.S. city to see a production of David M. Lutken's *Woody Sez* -- not when you consider that Oklahoma City was the first. Directed and co-"devised" by Nick Corley, *Woody* is a charmingly ramblin' tribute to a ramblin' folk hero. Without stepping on the point too heavily, Lutken plus a trio of nicely homespun multi-instrumentalists gradually convince us that Woody earned the right to write "This Land Is Your Land" by living with the people through hard times all across the country, sharing their campfires, their sufferings, and their aspirations while learning their heart.

Although Lutken & Co. squeeze in nearly 30 songs into 82-plus minutes, there is never a sense of rushing through the songlist and plenty of time for Lutken to unwind and acquaint us with Woody. (Extra helpings for those who arrive early -- plus an after-show hootenanny after Sunday matinees.) Onstage at Booth Playhouse, Lutken slips nonchalantly into character, running the gamut from sawdust folksiness to Communist orthodoxy to fiery patriotism, shooting most of his shafts against Republicans but aiming a barb or two against Dems as well.

Photos of Woody are discreetly posted on Luke Cantarella's dustbowl-themed set, and there's a modicum of physical resemblance between Woody and the man playing him. Lutken's voice and his battered guitar incline more toward Willie Nelson than Guthrie, so newcomers to the work will still be impressed when they return home with a thirst to sample more of Woody's approximately 1,000 songs online. Guthrie's voice was heard often on the air during the radio days and it certainly can't be counted worse than his disciple Bob Dylan's. The albums for children get their charm partly from the ordinariness of Guthrie's voice and delivery.

Guthrie didn't imbue his delivery with nearly as much emotion or drama as we find in Dylan -- or Lutken. Yet even as he takes it up a few notches, bringing a purposeful anger to the surface, the transition between Lutken's intro to "Sinking of the Reuben James" and his delivery is as smooth as Woody's. Another dramatic high point is "Pastures of Plenty," where Lutken as Woody can pinpoint finding his voice. The anthemic "This Land Is Your Land" and "This Train Is Bound for Glory" are reprised often enough to remind us of Woody's hobo ramblin'. But there are also oases of satirical comedy: "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," aimed at the patron saint of the Hoovervilles; "Do Re Mi," aimed at the California border patrol; and "Jolly Banker," aimed at tone-deaf politicians of both parties, with a special resonance for the BofA benefactors who gave us the Booth and Founders Hall.

Between songs, we get autobiographical tidbits from Woody about his childhood, his travels, his radio and recording gigs, and his occasional short-lived dalliances with commercialism. Lutken's backup trio, all of whom play at least four instruments, are adept enough at acting to step into cameo roles along the way. Darcie Deaville is Lefty Lou before leading the ensemble in singing "Union Maid," Helen J. Russell sings "Gypsy Davey" as Woody's mom, and Andy Teirstein -- who plays eight different instruments, including spoons -- portrays a nervous radio station manager and Guthrie sidekick Pete Seeger.

Much of what Woody reveals about his childhood is clouded by the harrowing consequences of his mother's affliction with Huntington's chorea. It is a horrific hereditary disease that subjects its sufferers to involuntary spasms, prompts them to bizarre actions, torments them with delusions, and eventually renders them speechless. So Woody was helplessly hospitalized during the late stages of his disease as his mother had before him. With three able actors onstage with Lutken, they can take over the narrative toward the very end.