

## **WOODY SEZ**

### **The words, music & spirit of Woody Guthrie**

Devised by David M. Lutken

with Nick Corley

Directed by Nick Corley

Music Direction by David M. Lutken

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center

Booth Playhouse

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Woody Guthrie is a beloved American folk icon. Born in 1912, almost 100 years ago, we may know his songs, but Woody Sez tells us about the man, often in his own words and through his music. He is part of a generation that experienced such tumultuous times as the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and World War II. What is wonderful is that the audience can experience a sense of the history of those times through this show, while being thoroughly entertained.

The most salient quality that comes across is Woody's affable and hopeful nature despite the tragedies in his own life. He is presented as deeply committed to the everyday man, of which he saw himself as one. Yet, his talent for music, and especially lyrics and other writing, set him apart as a spokesperson for the downtrodden who just wanted to make a fair living and feed their families. As performed by the multi-talented David M. Lutken, who also helped create the show, we are taken on a moving American journey. Woody believed in music's power to effect social change, and Mr. Lutken includes many references to Woody's political sensibilities, including affixing a sticker on his beat-up guitar saying "This machine kills fascists". Woody traveled the country singing his way from coast to coast. Though that hobo life is often romanticized in literature, there were most certainly many nights of hunger and desperation for men traveling the rails or simply walking across America to find work and a better life.

Mr. Lutken is joined on stage by three gifted actors/singers/performers who play multiple instruments and multiple roles: Darcie Deaville, Helen J. Russell, and Andy Teirstein. There are no microphones or amplifiers in keeping with the spirit of the show, and there is no problem hearing the words or music.

With David Lutken's distinctive voice, expert guitar and the accompaniment of the other performers, we are taken on a musical tour through Woody's life. While Woody composed literally thousands of songs, the show includes a selection that adequately represents the body of his work and the breadth of his life. "This Train is Bound for Glory" opens the show, and following are many of Woody's classics, including "This Land is Your Land", "Mule Skinner Blues", "The Ballad of Tom Joad", and "Dust Storm Disaster".

As musicians, each performer is given his or her moment to shine. Darcie Deaville plays a mandolin on most songs, but also shows her talents on other instruments, including fiddle, guitar and resonator guitar. Helen Russell, who also plays several instruments, is featured on the bass fiddle. Perhaps the most versatile, however, is Dr. Andy Teirstein who manages to display a wide range of talent on no less than a half dozen instruments, including fiddle, guitar, banjo, autoharp, harmonica and, yes, even the spoons. The show includes the performers in all combinations, from solos to duets to four-piece bluegrass band, where their well-blended harmonies are on display.

Center stage, of course, is David Lutken's embodiment of Woody as he makes his way from childhood to troubadour. Songs cover a variety of emotions, from the touching "Curly Headed Baby" to the comic "So Long It's Been Good to Know Yuh" and "Groundhog". The song "Pastures of Plenty" demonstrates how Woody says he found his voice. "Talking Merchant Marine" speaks to his life at sea during the war years. His support for workers is displayed in "Union Maid" and "Vigilante Man". And his life meets tragedy again when "Driving in My Car", a song composed for his daughter, becomes her last words.

This would be a good show for young people, too, who are often interested in their grandparents or great-grandparents lives. The performers also extended an invitation for the audience to bring their voices and instruments to a good ol' hootenanny in the lobby after each Sunday's matinee performance.

Most poignant of all is that Huntington's Disease, inherited from his mother, took Woody in 1967; at the end of his life, this wandering minstrel, this singer/songwriter of hard times and simple pleasures was confined to a hospital unable to speak, yet the joyful music and spirit of Woody Guthrie lives on. **Review by Ann Marie Oliva**

Ann Marie Oliva is a local playwright and freelance writer. She is the producer/editor of ARTS à la Mode and a judge for the National Youth Theatre Awards. Ann Marie is a member of the Dramatists Guild.