

Woody Sez

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Woody Guthrie said, "You may have been taught to call me by the name of a poet, but I am no more of a poet than you are ... The only story that I have tried to write has been you."

Woody also said, "Ever'body might be just one big soul, Well it looks that a-way to me."

In my third row seat in the Booth Playhouse last Sunday, I felt like more than an observer. This rare, moving theatrical event made me feel a connection, not just to Woody Guthrie's music, but to the man himself.

The talented cast drew us in from the very beginning, casually wandering out one at a time, beginning the music and talking warmly to the audience before the show really started.

The stage thrust has been extended outward for this show, so everyone gets to be close by. And this also makes possible one of the best aspects of the show — it's totally unplugged, not a microphone or amplifier to be had.

The show, devised by David M. Lutken and Nick Corley, effectively tells the life story of Woody Guthrie with 30 songs in 90 minutes. Corley, the show's director, modestly downplays his involvement, happy to give creative credit to the show's cast.

Lutken slips in and out of Woody's persona, sometimes first person, sometimes narrator. He seems born to play the part, with an easy-going manner and a voice similar to Woody's. (He's from Texas, not far from Woody's native Oklahoma). The guitar Lutken plays in the show is one he's been playing since the early '80s. In true Woody Guthrie style, it has a hole worn in it and is emblazoned with the words "this machine kills fascists."

The rest of the parts are played by three skilled musician-actors: Austin musician Darcie Deaville, songstress and upright bass player Helen J. Russell, and (Dr.) Andy Teirsten who, when he's not fiddling and portraying Pete Seeger in this production, is a professor at New York University. I lost track of how many instruments were utilized, but all the actors appear to be virtuosos on anything with strings, (plus harmonica, jaw harp and spoons).

The joyful music sustains us through the sad parts of the performance, just as Guthrie's art must have been what made his tragic life bearable. He endured the Great Depression, dust storms, house fires, family and personal tragedies, and still managed to write literally thousands of songs before his voice was so cruelly silenced.

The title of the show comes from the column Guthrie wrote 1939-40, entitled "Woody Sez" for the People's Daily, a communist newspaper published in San Francisco. This, along with his outspoken criticism of establishment and embracing of unions and the common man, led to him being labeled a Communist even though he never joined the Communist Party.

"Left wing, right wing, chicken wing — it's the same thing to me," he said. "I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em." He also joked, "I ain't a Communist necessarily, but I been in the red all my life."

Guthrie's associations caused him to be shunned by some, especially in his home state of Oklahoma. A gentleman who attended the "Woody Sez" show in Charlotte said he grew up in Oklahoma, and that during his childhood in the '60s, he never heard of Woody Guthrie.

It's hard to believe he didn't learn the song all of the rest of us kids sang, "This Land is Your Land." But we didn't sing all of the verses. In the show, you get to hear the verses that were left out of the schoolbooks:

As I went walking I saw a sign there

And on the sign it said 'No Trespassing.'

But on the other side it didn't say nothing,

That side was made for you and me. In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,

By the relief office I seen my people;

As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking

Is this land made for you and me? Nobody living can ever stop me,

As I go walking that freedom highway;

Nobody living can ever make me turn back

This land was made for you and me. And as this show illustrates, he never turned back, and nobody ever could make him stop being spokesman for the oppressed. And thanks to his songs that live on, not even a horrible disease could end his message.

"Woody Sez: the Words, Music & Spirit of Woody Guthrie" continues at the Booth Playhouse, 130 N. Tryon St. in Charlotte, through Feb. 21.

If you attend a Sunday matinee, you can attend a hootenanny in the lobby with the cast following the show. Tickets start at \$19.50. Call 704-372-1000.

For more information, visit www.woodysez.com.