Student production of Woody Guthrie musical charms

BY CARLOS MONTERREY | STAFF

This year marks the 100th birthday of America’s traveling troubadour, a man literally born from dust and shaped by the land — a man named Woody Guthrie. In timely fashion, UC Berkeley’s Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies premiered “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” this past Friday in what was an interactive production full of song, dance and Americana.

From the dust bowls of Oklahoma to the migrants who labored in the agriculture fields of California, Guthrie simply sang about what he knew. With a sticker that read “This Machine Kills Fascists” advertised across his guitar, Guthrie was a rebel who too often blurred the line between progressivism and communism for the comfort of many. Regardless of what political label gets stamped across Guthrie’s name, one thing that “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” makes clear is that he was about as American as they come.

In a time where income inequality and unemployment are the news of the day, the songs of Woody Guthrie seem to only have increased in relevance. As Peter Glazer, director of “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” was quoted in production notes, “Whenever I see this play, people tell me, ‘This is so timely’... I think the reason is that Woody sang about such powerful topics that haven’t gone away.” Forty-five years after Guthrie’s death, we find ourselves in many of the same situations he so eloquently simplified into acoustic melody. “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” gives us the chance to remember his work while reminding us that dissent is not only right — it’s American.

Through songs like “Do Re Mi!” and “Ludlow Massacre,” “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” paints a vivid picture of the folk singer’s life and times, from Oklahoma to the flashy lights of New York City. The musical opens with a quartet occupying the corner of the stage playing soft music as the lights fade in, manifesting a man’s quiet origins in the Oklahoma flatlands. Actors rush the stage from all directions, each professing the identity of Woody Guthrie in a loud bewildering collage of sight and sound. As the voices desist, the contrast between echoing noise and subtle quietness indicates the musical’s true commencement. From there on out the strings stay plucked and the voices in tune throughout two hours of musical meditation on the American spirit.

An interesting aspect of the musical is the interchanging role of Guthrie played by four different members of the cast. As different plot points are reached, different actors take the helm to provide
their take on the legendary folk singer. This variation gives room for captivating performances that provide each swap with a sense of freshness that keeps the audience’s interest at a steady high throughout the evening.

As the recurring notes of “This Land Is Your Land” are quietly plucked in the background serving as the musicals sporadic theme, the cast constructs a narrative on Guthrie’s life that is as informative as it is downright entertaining. Not lacking in guitar solos, violin fiddling, harmonica improv, bass slapping and a capella renditions, the musical is sure to impress on all fronts. Projecting a confident and playful presence, the cast takes it upon themselves to produce an interactive ambiance where clapping hands and audience hoedowns are welcomed and often sought.

After seeing “Woody Guthrie’s American Song,” it becomes bewildering to realize that the folk icon is largely underrated and understudied. Influencing a generation of musicians spanning from Bob Dylan to Wilco, Guthrie serves as the foundation to American folk rock. The theater department’s homage to Guthrie is not only well timed but also well done — an innovative production that’s warranted by its historical and timeless subject.

**EVENT DETAILS:**

*What: ‘Woody Guthrie’s American Song’*

*When: Nov. 15 – 18*

*Where: Durham Studio Hall*

*Tickets: TDPS box office*

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