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'American Song' is haunting echo of today

Camelot Theatre's tribute to Woody Guthrie's Depression-era music resonates with American feelings of loss

August 12, 2012

By **Angela Decker**
for the Mail Tribune

Woody Guthrie's songs about poverty, drought, greedy bankers and home foreclosures could have been written yesterday instead of during the Dust Bowl and Depression era of the 1930s. Yet, while witnessing so many instances of the American dream gone wrong, Guthrie's music celebrates the resiliency of the American people.

This year marks what would have been the 100th birthday of the legendary folk singer, and Camelot Theatre is celebrating the man, his music and American spirit with "Woody Guthrie's American Song."

The show opened Friday, Aug. 10, and runs through Sept. 9. Curtain is at 8 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and at 2 p.m. Sundays. A pay-what-you-can performance is set for 8 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 15. Regular tickets cost \$25, \$23 for students and seniors.

Guthrie was born in 1912 in Okema, Okla. After a number of personal and financial tragedies, his family was forced to separate. By age 14, Guthrie was living on his own as an itinerant worker and street musician. He traveled the country from Dust Bowl Oklahoma to California and New York and spent his life working with and learning from regular people, sharing in their struggles.

The play emphasizes Guthrie's belief that he was merely putting people's words and experiences into song.

At one point in the show, a character states Guthrie's desire to be "the man who taught you something you already knew."

The story, conceived and adapted by Peter Glazer, is told in Woody Guthrie's own words, taken from his writings and songs. Camelot Artistic Director Livia Genise directs a talented cast of five performers, Tamara Marston, Kendra Taylor, Tyler Ward, Peter Wickliffe and Scott Woolsey, who each embody an aspect of the character of Woody Guthrie or move the storyline along.

Tamara Marston stands out with her rich voice and engaging stage presence, as does Peter Wickliffe, who plays the young Guthrie character with enthusiasm and charm.

The cast, in simple costumes that reflect the era, play their guitars and deliver their lines with the liveliness and ease that comes from hard work and experience. Their individual performances are strong and distinctive, and as an ensemble they are tight and energetic, clearly enjoying themselves and the music as they encourage the audience to sing along with several of the songs.

The onstage band that backs up the actors is smooth and unobtrusive, and includes Peter Spring on bass, Mark Tuttle on fiddle and James Abdo on guitar. The simple set, designed by Roy Von Rains Jr., evokes the transient nature of Guthrie's life and the people he encountered.

This is a musical biography about a prolific songwriter and singer, so the play is rich with music. The nearly 2 1/2 hour show includes more than two dozen songs, including "Hard Travelin'," which opens the show, "Bound for Glory," "Union Maid," and, of course, "This Land is Your Land," the song that became America's unofficial anthem.

Guthrie's songs are lively and thought-provoking, and this production does them justice. All the musical numbers hit the mark with the exception of "Deportees," a protest song that details a tragic 1948 plane crash that killed 26 migrant farm workers. It comes across as melodramatic and somewhat shrill. Otherwise, the songs and performances beautifully articulate Guthrie's world and the workingman spirit that he celebrated.

The show itself offers a meaningful look at our past and our eerily similar present, at the end leaving the audience both contemplative and humming a happy tune.

Camelot Theatre is at 101 Talent Ave., Talent. Tickets are available at www.CamelotTheatre.org or by calling 541-535-5250.

Angela Decker is a freelance writer in Ashland and can be reached at decker4@gmail.com.

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When: Through Sept. 9

Where: Camelot Theatre, 101 Talent Ave., Talent

Tickets: \$25, \$23 for students and seniors; see www.CamelotTheatre.org or call 541-535-5250

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