

Tom Taylor as Guthrie

Good show but melodramatic

Tom Taylor as Woodie Guthrie; how should one judge a performance of this sort, as an historical representation or as a self-sufficient work of art? Should the only yardstick we use to measure Tom Taylor be the work of his model, Woodie Guthrie or would it be wiser to concentrate upon the ability of the man before us?

Billed as being in the tradition of "Mark Twain Tonight!", Will Rodger's U.S.A., and Give 'Em Hell, Harry" this performance is one of the wave of one-man shows that are sweeping our continent. They seem to defy objective assessment because of their intricate combination of historical fact, dramatic presentation, and, as in this case, musical ability.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born in Okema, Oklahoma in 1912 and during his lifetime produced about 1000 songs and ballads, three novels and innumerable short stories, articles and letters. Folk music specialists freely admit that the music for many of his most famous songs was derived from the works of other artists. His style of guitar playing was patterned after that of Maybell Carter of the famous Carter family and the music for Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" is similar to their "Little darling, pal of mine." However, this practice is common among folk musicians and in no way detracts from the value of Guthrie's work. Until about 1938 Guthrie was a "country musician" that is, he was a man from a rural background who sang of the problems of the country to a primarily rural

audience. After this turning point he became an "urban folk musician" i.e. his audience was from the city, and, in Guthrie's case, primarily intellectual.

As far as the historical element of Tom Taylor's performance is concerned I was quite satisfied. The tendency towards idealization that is common in the modern "nostalgia" trade, though present, was not as overpowering as in many productions. Guthrie was shown as a man who had a difficult childhood, (his sister died in an accident, his mother went insane and his father committed suicide) but was able to retain his sense of humor and a reasonable perspective of life.

The performance begins with Guthrie in a wheelchair suffering from the effects of Huntington's chorea, a disease of the nervous system from which he died in 1967. This sort of beginning had the potential of turning Guthrie into the modern equivalent of a medieval saint, long suffering and placid, but Taylor skirted this pitfall by keeping it short and quickly stepping up the tempo of the show with a humorous song about bed-wetting. With the effects of Huntington's disease no longer apparent, a vigorous and fast talking "Guthrie" gives a rundown of his apprenticeship in the music trade during the "Dustbowl" period in the American Southwest. The running combination of music and dialogue takes on a political cast as a result of his experiences as one of those "Okies" who fled to California. At one point

"Guthrie" is asked if he is a Communist. He denies this, but says that he would feel no shame in admitting it if he was. Taylor expressed Guthrie's problems with censorship by stepping up to a microphone and doing a fast talking radio program that is cut off in midstream.

The second act is concerned with the latter part of Guthrie's career. In it his role as a rebel is re-emphasized by another foreshortened radio performance. On the whole, the second portion of the program was an attempt to give a more personal glimpse of Guthrie the man. His relationship to alcohol is expressed by the classic line, "You know, there's a lot of good ideas in a pint; and not as many in a quart."

Taylor portrays Guthrie's relationship to his children through an imaginary conversation with a daughter. This shows the other side of the close family relationship that can be seen in Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant." (In this movie, Arlo, Woodie's son, films one of his last visits to his dying father.)

The end of the performance has "Guthrie" expressing his responsibility as a people's poet. He considers himself as a representational artist who simply expresses what he found present in the hearts of the people. He returns to the wheelchair as at the beginning of the show and convincingly portrays a man bravely trying to play his most famous song, "This Land is Your Land" with hands crippled by Huntington's chorea. I found this



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end to be unfortunate in that it destroyed the sense of vigorous natural strength that gave the show its life. It gave a tragic or perhaps even melodramatic note to the work of a man who fought oppression, misfortune, and despair with his intelligent humor.

by Stanley Beeler

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