

***Girl from the North Country* and *Woody Sez*: Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Musical Theatre**

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*Politics is theater. It doesn't matter if you win. You make a statement.
You say, I'm here, pay attention to me. – Harvey Milk*

When Lady Gaga opens her concert with Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" and Bob Dylan garners the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 2016), it is apparent that creative work by these cultural titans has wandered into new regions of art, entertainment, and public consumption.¹ Recent productions of musical theatre pieces built around Guthrie and Dylan material presents a rather novel development in the ongoing popularisation and canonisation of both artists — each of whom has been inextricably associated with the notion of the American "common man," a mythic creature that remains firmly ensconced in the popular imagination. The prolific perpetuation of mythmaking to new audiences, advanced by the distinct yet sometimes overlapping Guthrie and Dylan camps, and nearly bordering on religious and/or political obsession, demonstrates that while you can't have one without the other, the ways of presenting their work is most certainly not limited to folk music collaborations by established or new artists, the release of new or reissued recordings, or the *ad infinitum* cover versions that appear in public, private, or academic settings. While musical theatre history has long occupied a "populist" space where social, political, and economic themes occasionally flow into the cultural mainstream of popular entertainment, these new theatre works expose distinct differences in how Guthrie and Dylan each experienced and engaged with the world, to say little of how their legacies continue to be constructed. What I present here is less a "review" of these works than a discussion of the underlying themes and subjective "truths" of the narratives being told through their songs (*always the songs!*) and what these new forays into musical theatre reveal to audiences about these folk icons and their respective legacies.²

Girl from the North Country is a production commissioned by London's Old Vic Theatre — initiated by Columbia, Dylan's record company, and sanctioned by Dylan himself. *Woody Sez: The Life and Music of Woody Guthrie* is a slowly gestated off-Broadway work that appeared at the Irish Repertory Theater in New York City. While they could be regarded as "songbook" or "catalog" musicals, each provides audiences an opportunity to reacquaint themselves or revisit the underlying stories, ideas, images, and sounds that drive Guthrie's

and Dylan's creative and artistic output. Whether you are informed *cognoscenti*, a fan, or a neophyte student of traditional American folk music, to hear the songs and stories of the iconic political singer-songwriters of the 1930s-40s (Guthrie) and 1960s counterculture (Dylan) set to theatrical stagings and performed with new musical arrangements in a variety of genres and styles far removed from the "traditional" may strike a rather odd discord for many accustomed to the tradition of American folk presentation (i.e., the lone singing poet/troubadour).

There are two central questions on which I focus: first, how are Guthrie's and Dylan's American stories being translated into musical theater? That is, can musical theatre serve as a conduit for either Guthrie's or Dylan's layered and complex visions? And, second, to what end? Are these works created to reflect current social, political, and economic climates, or are they just instances of crass exploitation and commodification of Guthrie's and Dylan's songs? When historically political and social messages are reduced to fodder for entertainment and career building, rather than expanding audience awareness of the ideas, commodity capitalisation of culture remains a concern. Here, I am less interested in the fact that Guthrie's and Dylan's works continue to be reproduced and repackaged for greater public consumption, or in applying a classic Marxist, Frankfurt School (read Socialist), or even Lomaxian cultural reading and critique. Adherence to either musical or cultural "authenticity" is beside the point.

Instead, I explore the semiotic "meaningfulness" of these works and their relevance to the present political moment when mediated by the musical theatre format. The point of this inquiry, then, is to shed light on the legacy-building processes surrounding Guthrie and Dylan, as I argue that an analysis of these novel and contrasting productions illustrate essential differences between the "actors" and their work. When presented as musical theatre, the creative sources from which these works derive draws out the values and emphasis of each artist, and why they remain contemporary, even when historically framed and dramatically staged for entertainment purposes.

The *Girl*

The Irish writer and director Conor McPherson took on the *Girl* project for its promising dramatic potential, one that aligned well with his previous narrative style, which can be described as fictive-documentary: realist yet often relying on supernatural elements for tension and resolution (e.g., angels and devils — so *apropos* to Dylan). He sets the location in Dylan's hometown (Duluth, Minnesota, USA); sets the time, 1934, *pre*-Bob and in the midst of

the Great Depression (cf. *Dust Bowl Ballads* below, one of Guthrie's central song cycles); and then occupies the space with sundry characters that sing and dance, that is, *perform* the songs *on stage*, including Elizabeth Laine (Shirley Henderson), a haunted character who strangely echoes Guthrie's own mother, Nora Belle (Tanner), in the full throes of a cognitive, nervous disorder.

The *Girl*'s narrative arc is one where the complexities of existence are centrally placed, where each character displays their personal struggles through Dylan's songs, exposing interiorities, conflicts and the inescapable crisis of living. Set within a shabby boarding house on the verge of foreclosure, run by Nick Laine (Ciarán Hinds) and his troubled wife, we see Joe Scott (Arinzé Kene), an itinerant black boxer, express his outsider status, singing "Hurricane" (*Desire*, 1976), thereby revealing his experiences of racial discrimination; a young couple on the verge of final separation ironically sing "I Want You" (*Blonde on Blonde*, 1966), each seemingly oblivious of the other's feelings; and, of course, the trademark wandering or leaving songs "Like a Rolling Stone" (*Highway 61 Revisited*, 1965) and "Duquesne Whistle" (*Tempest*, 2012) are performed by the twenty-member cast and musicians, as production numbers with a touch of the liturgical, replete with fallen preacher and gospel choruses. Twenty Dylan songs in the production thus serve to convey the emotional and psychological states of each character. But, instead of the songs driving the plot, McPherson explains:

A lot of fans love that Woody Guthrie dust bowl kind of Bob Dylan, with 16 verses and no chorus ... But what I was looking for here were songs with more musical development in them, that had a verse, a bridge, a chorus, a middle eight, all that stuff, that give the performers the chance to lean into something emotionally and go deeper and deeper and deeper into the music.³

As a result, the new musical arrangements of the songs work to support the loosely structured narrative in a uniquely dramatic manner. In fact, the songs are the story, which the cast performs as if they were masked characters in a radio play — an evocative representation of a "Grand Opry" style radio broadcast.

The *Girl* certainly does not adhere to what Broadway producer and historian Jack Viertel notes as the classic structure of musical theatre—neither is it exactly traditional. It is neither a jukebox or catalog musical, nor a glossy tribute production about a celebrity artist or group.⁴

The production is innovative as a postmodern experiment however.



The *Girl* cast performs “Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter” (1976)

There is no opening production number to set the stage, or lead character to establish the so-called “I want song.”⁵ But it does not really matter; McPherson has a story to tell, or rather a set of songs with narrative intent. McPherson’s method recalls the dustcover description of Greil Marcus’s *Invisible Republic* (1997): “What emerges is a mystical body of the (American) republic, a kind of public secret. Ghost lovers and unsolved crimes replace the great



Bob Dylan in *Madhouse on Castle Street* (1963). Photo: British Film Institute.

personages and events of national life, and the country’s story takes shape all over again.”⁶ Thus, the Gothic American-centric values

espoused in the work are underscored by several Dylan tropes. Characters move between being pitiful to having pity, from lacking soul to being soulful, from having faith to losing it, from being meaningless to becoming meaningful, and, especially, the constant play of desire and the human need for family, home, redemption.

As several regional and off-Broadway productions trading on the American folk music tradition appear with greater frequency,⁷ the question remains: will the *Girl* make it to Broadway? *The cultural clock is ticking and the Great White Way is ripe for Bob's pickin'*.⁸

Woody Sez

David Lutken's *Woody Sez* gives audiences an entirely different experience. The off-Broadway production is structured around biographical moments from Guthrie's gloriously tragic life, drawing from Guthrie's "hits" to express his struggles, joys, and pain. Performed by a talented cast of actors/musicians, the work weaves a historical but tangled chronological thread around the standard Dust Bowl/Depression-era imagery of displacement — barren, dried up fields; migrants in search of work. The production's design, lighting, and sound all work to invoke Guthrie's cosmology while his songs serve as a running personal commentary, which Lutken's "Woody" delivers with honest emotion and clear-eyed perspective. Setting the earthy dust and rusty hues and timbres associated with the Dust Bowl balladeer, *Woody Sez* seems somewhat eager to satisfy audience expectations, at least for those that are familiar with Guthrie's songs, by creating a kind of spiritual bonding or familiar unity.⁹

In the first half of the production, Woody's travels document the Depression era and establish his Oklahoma cadences through traditional folk standards, from "Gypsy Davy," "I Ride an Ol' Paint," "Mule Skinner Blues," to the Dust Bowl ballads ("So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," "Talkin' Dust Bowl," "Ballad of Tom Joad"). Interspersed are Guthrie songs that call out greed and injustice ("Jolly Banker," "[If You Ain't Got The] Do Re Mi"), along with deeply personal reflections ("I've Got to Know" and "Curly Headed Baby", the latter tenderly linked to his mother Nora Belle), also giving further shape to Guthrie's character. The genius of Guthrie's transfiguration here, however, is one where the outlier and outcast becomes the voice, or voices, of other people, expressing their lives and struggles, disappointments and hopes.

The talented company of actors and musicians, playing traditional American folk instruments (guitars, banjos, fiddles,

spoons, harmonica, zithers, mandolins, dulcimers, and more), join “Woody” in duets, trios, or as a group in an extended “hootenanny” of sorts, with fairly traditional musical and vocal arrangements from Lutken and the ensemble. Whether exuberant or mournful, the singing (and a little dancing) transcends all representations or interpretations, as the audience becomes an extended family of “Woody’s children”, both in a congregational and a working class sense. Threaded throughout the production, “Tom Joad” reappears to reprise and reiterate the political awareness that permeates Guthrie’s lyrics—a musical “ghost” as it were. “The Internationale” is also heard near the end of Act I, further foreshadowing Guthrie’s growing political consciousness and commitment.¹⁰



David Lutken and Helen Jean Russell sing “Gypsy Davy.” Photograph by Wendy Mutz. Lyric Theater of Oklahoma.

After intermission, Act II veers directly into Guthrie’s political songs. Lutken relies on Woody’s personal life to inform and “fill out the dimensionality of his power”—that is, Guthrie’s ability to write (as one reviewer puts it) “the greatest topical, political, cultural, observational songs in the entire canon of American musical history.” Undoubtedly hyperbolic, but, as Lutken clarifies: “The depth of the meaning of what [Guthrie] wrote is illuminated and enhanced by knowing more about the life he lived.”¹¹

The trace outlines of Guthrie’s life are, by now, well familiar to many: the rambling Okie, following natural and man-made disasters (the Dust Bowl Ballads in Act I), leaves his home (“I Ain’t Got No Home,” “Going Down That Road Feelin’ Bad”) in search of a better life (“Pastures of Plenty”); he encounters and is shaken by his experiences on the road (“Vigilante Man,” “Do Re Mi”), then commits to his mission—to fight for the common man and woman

(“This Train Is Bound for Glory,” “Union Maid”). As his travels extend into the greater world at large, so does his political awareness; he thereby decides to confront issues of fascism, race, labor, migration, and poverty (“Sinking of the Reuben James,” “Talkin’ Merchant Marine,” “Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done,” “Deportees”). The last sentence of perhaps Guthrie’s most often quoted line (“I hate a song...”) perfectly summarizes the work of *Woody Sez*: “The songs that I sing are made up for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you,” placing the emphasis right back on the people, the folk, and the audience.

If it weren’t for “folk music,” the narrative trajectory of Guthrie’s life could certainly receive an operatic treatment. However, the final stages of Guthrie’s life are not part of this production, a directorial choice that, while questionable, is understandable given the tragic arc of Guthrie’s final years. Nonetheless, the songs that end Act I and Act II (“I’ve Got to Know/Why Do You Stand There in the Rain” and “This Land Is Your Land,” respectively) tie together the strands of Guthrie’s life into a neat and hopeful, somewhat melancholy yet triumphant journey.

Conclusion

In all its forms and variations, theatre reflects the world as it exists or can be imagined. What audiences take away from a musical theatre work depends on many factors: the quality of the production, the performances by cast members, and how its themes are presented or understood. While a more systematic study of audience reception (interviews, questionnaires etc.) would help determine its demographic makeup (race, class, gender etc.), identifying the personal, political, or philosophical values of audience members through an analysis of musical tastes or cultural and aesthetic preferences is unlikely. If we further consider theatre locations where the productions are performed (the *Girl* at the Old Vic in London and *Woody Sez* at the Irish Repertory Theater in New York City), it only complicates efforts to ascertain either the artistic intent or the motivation of its producers — that is, unless we consider the substance and context of each production, and how they are either similar or different.

Guthrie’s and Dylan’s songs are the core elements of these productions, giving clues not only about the messaging — what the producers are trying to convey — but their meaning. American “identity,” which lies at the thematic center of each production, calls into question the idea or mythos of an American dream and an

American reality, where that identity can be observed. Bruce Springsteen's inspiration from Guthrie and Dylan not only helped him define his understanding of this strange intersection, it revealed his artistic mission: to find "the place ... where the political and personal came together to spill clear water in the muddy river of history."¹² Dylan and Guthrie (and Springsteen) have each had very different relationships with American folk music, popular culture, commercial acceptance, fame and fortune. And yet, each developed the personal and political aspects of their work in unique ways.

How, then, are *Woody Sez* and the *Girl* different or similar? Characters in Dylan's songs can be described as archetypes of humanity, whereas Guthrie's songs tell stories about the lives of real people. The endless "road" songs to freedom, or elsewhere, that every wandering troubadour needs and is often bound by, are not only present but appear in slightly altered forms: Guthrie is Ulysses to Dylan's Homer, as characters in each one's songs demonstrate contrasting sets of realities-unrealities. *Woody Sez* shows a communal group singing, dancing, living and working together, versus the *Girl*, where characters are in constant conflict and tension with one another, never establishing either lasting trust or confidence, some as blind as Homer, others as cunning as Ulysses.

In the present moment, where we are all living in what Masha Gessen has described as a degraded sense of reality,¹³ this move toward the mainstreaming of American folk music is both gratifying and disturbing. Musical theatre always strives to give audiences what they want: a show, a spectacle, songs, music, dance, costumes, a story — and both McPherson's and Lutken's companies do so, to great effect. Audiences for the *Girl* and *Woody Sez* want Dylan and Guthrie songs, but they receive rather different messages, despite the thematic or period similarities.

There is irony in that both Guthrie and Dylan were involved in the cultural modernist movements of their time. Guthrie's life in New York City during the 1940s was informed by its progressive political, artistic, and literati scenes. His collaboration with choreographer Sophie Maslow in *Folksay* (1942), where he met his second wife, Marjorie Mazia, a dancer with Martha Graham's company, is just one of many intercultural interactions. Dylan's "going electric" at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival stands as the vanguard moment in folk music's paradigm shift toward modernity, where he breaks with the traditional folk format and, as a result, is roundly criticized for it. The folk music establishment could neither control nor contain either of its major artists, where even the term is suspect, thereby allowing Pete Seeger to take on the populist mantle of the "American folk singer," championing Guthrie's songs while rejecting Dylan. Guthrie's and Dylan's music publishers, the keepers of these intellectual and cultural properties, decide when and to

whom licenses and permissions are granted, hopefully ensuring that new productions such as the *Girl* and *Woody Sez* will perpetuate not only their enduring iconicity but their audiences' interest. Somehow, these songs do not remain the same: they now shift, are molded and reshaped to meet new artistic visions and the desires of a public that will continue to need them, perhaps now more than ever.

NOTES

¹ Joan Osborne's residency at The Café Carlyle in New York City in 2017 featured "Songs of Bob Dylan". Given Dylan's recent recordings (and touring) of the American Popular Songbook, this is perhaps indicative of an interpretive reach into New York's cabaret "society" format—arguably an odd juxtaposition of folk and cabaret musical styles.

² As neither a musical theatre historian or critic, I will not endeavor to address either the disciplinary or structural scope of the works. I note, however, that critical and public response to both *The Girl* and *Woody Sez* has been generally positive. For a good overview of British reviews of the *Girl*, see *Playbill* compilation: <http://www.playbill.com/searchpage/search?q=Gir1%2520From%2520the%2520North%2520Country&qasset=00000157-a043-d285-a55f-a7d749690000>.

The *New York Times*'s Andy Webster concludes his review of *Woody Sez* with the following: "As for Guthrie — with his uncondescending articulation of working-class woes and accessible, common-sense critiques of the privileged class — we sure could use a man like him right now." See Webster, "Review: *Woody Sez* Sings of Land Not Always Made for You and Me," *New York Times*, Theatre Section, June 14, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/theater/review-woody-sez-sings-of-woody-guthrie-and-land-not-always-made-for-you-and-me.html>.

³ Nick Curtis in conversation with Conor McPherson official website for *Girl from the North Country*: <https://www.girlfromthenorthcountry.london/origins>.

⁴ Cf. *Springsteen on Broadway*, the Boss's one-man show, which started as a limited run in 2017, and whose success and public demand extended the run into 2018. While I have not attended the critically acclaimed (and expensive) show, I maintain that Springsteen is the popular-populist "offspring(steen)" of both Guthrie and Dylan, in terms of aesthetics, working class roots, and thereby audience affiliation. See Adam Hetrick, "7 Musical Theatre Songs Bruce Springsteen Should Rock on Broadway," *Playbill*, September 2, 2017: <http://www.playbill.com/article/7-musical-theatre-songs-bruce-springsteen-should-rock-on-broadway>.

⁵ Jack Viertel, "Curtain Call: How Woody Guthrie — of All People — Changed Broadway Musicals Forever," in Viertel, *The Secret Life of the American Musical* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016): 259-270.

⁶ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997), dust jacket.

⁷ A few examples include *Spoon River* (2014), which won the 2015 Dora Award for Outstanding New Musical. It premiered outside Toronto and was presented at the Pershing Square Signature Center Theater in New York City in 2017. Based on Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), it is a collection of short, free-verse poems that collectively narrate the epitaphs of the residents of Spoon River, a fictional small town named after the real Spoon River that ran near Masters's home town. The poems aim to demystify rural, small town American life. See Ben Brantley, "Review: What the Singing Dead Remember in *Spoon River*," *New York Times*, July 16, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/16/theater/spoon-river-review-soulpepper.html>.

In *Whitman at the Whitney* (2015), composer and saxophonist Daniel Bennett blends Mozart and American folk music, drawing on Whitman's appreciation for classical and American folk music as its inspiration. Whitman's quintessentially American poetry is thus rendered in dramatic readings underscored by an eclectic, experimental soundtrack. See "Saxophonist Daniel Bennett Blends Mozart and American Folk in *Whitman at the Whitney* Theater Production," *Broadway World*, August 4, 2017: <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Saxophonist-Daniel-Bennett-Blends-Mozart-and-American-Folk-in-WHITMAN-AT-THE-WHITNEY-Theater-Production-20170804>.

In *Hadestown* (2016) — as the production's official website describes it — "celebrated singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell and inventive two-time Obie award-winning director Rachel Chavkin ... transform Mitchell's phenomenal concept album into a bold new work for the stage. This new musical follows Orpheus' mythical quest to overcome Hades and regain the favor of his one true love, Eurydice. Together we travel from wide open plains where love and music are not enough nourishment to survive the winter, down to Hadestown, an industrialized world of mindless labor. Inspired by traditions of classic American folk music and vintage New Orleans jazz, Mitchell's beguiling melodies and poetic imagination pit nature against industry, faith against doubt, and love against death." See <http://www.hadestown.com/#about>.

And, of course, there are the more "traditional" touring ensemble productions, such as Jim O'Neil's *The Lonesome Traveler* (2015) or Peter Glazer's *Woody Guthrie's American Song* (2015). In addition, several one-man, multimedia shows, such as Randy Noojin's *Hard Travelin' with Woody* (2017), follow the Dylan thread, producing somewhat fictionalized, biographical musical portraits of Guthrie.

⁸ Bob Dylan's early interest in theatre is notable. His first visit to London, in 1963, was to take part in the BBC television theatrical production, *Madhouse on Castle Street*, in which his character, a traveling "hobo" musician — a real stretch — performed four songs, including the first ever broadcast of "Blowin' in the Wind" as well as "Hang Me," "The Cuckoo Bird," and "Ballad of the Gliding Swan."

⁹ During intermission at the performance I attended, I overheard several comments by people saying they had seen the musical more than once.

¹⁰ Bruce Springsteen takes the "congregational" aspect of performance to an entirely different level of popular music, where his marathon concerts, often lasting several hours, take on the spectacle of a mass religious movement, as the "Boss" preaches the "Bible of Rock." Admiring Guthrie, Springsteen writes, "His writing wasn't soapbox rambling but finely wrought personal portraits of American lives, told with toughness, wit and common wisdom." Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), p. 292.

¹¹ Linda Tuccio-Koonz, "Woody Sez: *The Life and Music of Woody Guthrie* on Stage at Westport Country Playhouse. *New Haven Register*, January 4, 2018: <http://www.nhregister.com/entertainment/article/Woody-Sez-The-Life-and-Music-of-Woody-12462163.php>.

¹² Springsteen, *Born to Run*, p. 294.

¹³ Masha Gessen, "Fire and Fury Is a Book All Too Worthy of the President," *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2018: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/fire-and-fury-is-a-book-all-too-worthy-of-the-president>.