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DANCE REVIEW

Caravan offers joyous Woody Guthrie tribute

BY WENDY LIBERATORE
Gazette Reporter

ALBANY — The Vanaver Caravan tripped across the country on Sunday afternoon in a joyous tribute to Woody Guthrie. In “Pastures of Plenty,” the music and dance ensemble captured the essence of Guthrie’s message for the common man. It’s about peace, justice and respect for yourself and your brethren.

And “Pastures of Plenty” played out in a way that was as upbeat and infectious as a tent revival. If the audience didn’t leave as true believers in this American songwriter, they surely left with a profound reverence for his talent.

The Vanaver Caravan is known for its performances that cherish world traditions. Proponents of American folk music and dance,

this Guthrie homage, proposed to them by Guthrie’s daughter Nora, was a natural fit. The band, composed of co-founder Bill Vanaver on guitar/banjo, John Kirk on fiddle, Amy Fradon on vocals, Jim Barbaro on guitar, Mark Murphy on bass and Sam Zucchini on drums, did justice to songs like “Deportee,” “Union Maid” and “Vigilante Man.”

Yet what made this tribute special was the dance. Co-founder Livia Vanaver choreographed numbers to go along with songs like “Pretty Boy Floyd,” “Peace Pin Boogie” and “Dust Storm Disaster.” A mixed bag of dancing styles — clogging, modern, country square, contra with a little jitterbug thrown in at the end — it showed off the Caravan’s vast versatility and winsome personality.

Livia Vanaver wisely created the routines with such simplicity

that neither song nor dance dominated. The dance served to elevate the songs.

For example, in “Pretty Boy Floyd,” the dancers acted out the tale of the Oklahoma Robin Hood. In “Dust Storm Disaster,” the barefooted dancers became the wind, with their dresses and shirt tails billowing, and then the aimless refugees. In “Do Re Mi,” they formed a chorus line for a clogging number that was as happy as it was fun.

The Vanaver Caravan has not performed in the region for a while so it was great to see some of the dancers, like Elijah Vanaver and Miranda Ten Broeke, who grew up as part of the Caravan Kids and the Vanaver Youth Company. Clogger Amy Fenton-Shine remains a main player, hammering the floor boards with her articulate feet. This statu- esque and ramrod straight hooper

appeared like an angel as she floated among the other dancers.

The Caravan also brought along its next generation of promising youngsters. They took the stage in a medley of Guthrie’s children’s songs and were precious to watch. Their presence also gave hope that these songs and the stories that they tell will be passed on.

The youngsters returned in the finale, a rousing rendering of “This Land is Your Land.” With the stage filled with dancers, the number became a moving celebration of the American spirit and Guthrie’s wonderful gift — singing songs for and about the people.

Reach Gazette reporter Wendy Liberatore at 395-3199 or at wendy@dailygazette.com.

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