

Carroll County Times

Westminster, MD

Feast in the 'Pastures of Plenty'

By Pam Zappardino, Art Critic
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The Vanaver Caravan rolled into Carroll County last Saturday night and, if you weren't at the Carroll Arts Center, you missed one of the best performances you are likely to see anywhere.

I was a little skeptical about a "Tribute to Woody Guthrie in Dance and Music" called "Pastures of Plenty." Tributes can be iffy. But Walt Michael, director of Common Ground on the Hill, booked the show as part of this year's Common Ground concert series, and Pete Seeger gave the group a rave review. I figured those two guys just couldn't be wrong, and besides, I was up for an adventure.

I got more than I bargained for. With no sets and simple costumes, Vanaver Caravan presented a lush feast for the senses. And for the soul.

From the first few notes and foot stomps, the audience was transported into Woody's world, a world where "about all a human being is, anyway, is just a hoping machine." A world where Guthrie's skill with the pen and melody paints vivid pictures of want and joy, of love for America coupled with demands for social justice and fixing what doesn't work right.

Bill Vanaver took the stage and Woody Guthrie showed up. Vanaver never tried to impersonate Guthrie; he just let Woody's spirit come through. It worked.

Playing guitar and banjo, he sang "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Union Maid" and a rap-presaging "Talking Dustbowl Blues" with one of the best string bands you could put together - Frank Orsini, Mark Murphy and Jim Barbaro on fiddle, bass and guitar, respectively.

Vocalist Amy Fradon was magnificent on "Deportee," her bright red shirt standing in contrast to the down-home outfits of the other musicians. I was a bit surprised the group sang only the familiar verses of "This Land Is Your Land," as the more controversial (and seldom sung) ones would have worked well.

Livia Vanaver was everywhere. She sang, she danced as if born to it, and she choreographed the energetic movement which accompanied nearly all of the songs and ranged from good old flat-footing to balletic reveries to the swing dance of "Peace Pin Boogie."

The Caravan dancers - Livia, Talli Jackson, Isabel Cottingham, David Pakenham, Elijah Vanaver, Amber Wirthman, Ramona Staffeld and Miranda ten Broeke - are an eclectic group, and they gave depth and character to the times and the people Guthrie set to music.

Pete Seeger predicted that "In the end, everyone [would be] on their feet cheering."

He was right.



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Dancers Talli Jackson, Elijah Vanaver, Ramona Staffeld, David Pakenham, and Amber Wirthmann in "Dust Storm Disaster" from The Vanaver Caravan's "Pastures of Plenty"