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Simply Spectacular

By Louis B. Hobson, Calgary Sun | January 18, 2013

In her musical tribute *Blanche: The Bittersweet Life of a Wild Prairie Dame*, Onalea Gilbertson says her paternal grandmother was one hell of a woman.

Spend 64 minutes with Blanche through the eyes, lyrics and voice of the radiant Onalea and you know truer words were never spoken.

With *Prairie Dame*, Gilbertson has crafted one hell of a play which ranks right up there with the classic Canadian memory musical *Billy Bishop Goes to War*.

Onalea taped her late grandmother's voice during interviews and uses snippets to link the 17 songs while she projects photographs and film from her grandmother's collection.

I readily admit *Prairie Dame* moved me to tears of sadness and joy and I know I will return to see it again because shows like this are all too rare.

The songs and Onalea's voice often made me think of Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday because they come from the guts as well as the heart.

You simply cannot fake emotion this strong and deep.

You could hear a pin drop at the performance I attended when Onalea sang Woody on Horseback about the day her brother-in-law came to tell her that her husband was dead and then the audience laughed and clapped along when Blanche recalls her wild, flirtatious days in *Isn't It Scandalous* or her hard partying days when her second husband worked up in the oil fields as recalled in *Weekend Parties*.

Heartache and heartbreak are the themes and the emotions behind *The Last Time I Saw You*, *Getting Old Doesn't Pay* and *The Last Football Game* but the audience cheered when Onalea belted out Blondie, the beautiful ode to her remarkable grandmother.

The whole concept behind *Prairie Dame* and its staging by Rachel Avery scream genius.

Onalea is joined on stage by musicians Jonathan Lewis, Brian Sanders and Jeff Gladstone who play the three great loves in Blanche's life.

It's not a gimmick. These musicians really do become the men we see in the photographs from Blanche's albums and they will rip at your heart just as they did at Blanche's.

Blanche and Onalea leave Lunchbox on Jan 26 so book your visit immediately.