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# Fantastic prairie moments takes voice at Rodeo Onalea Gilbertson tells the life of irrepressible grandmother through song

BY STEPHEN HUNT, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 16, 2013



Christina Ryan, Calgary Herald  
Onalea Gilbertson and  
Brian Sanders on cello during *Blanche: The Bittersweet  
Life of a Wild Prairie Dame*, pose after the play at  
Lunchbox Theatre, in Calgary on January 14, 2013

**Photograph by:** Christina Ryan, Calgary Herald

You've got to hear Blanche.

Both the musical *Blanche*, as embodied by [Onalea Gilbertson](#), and the actual *Blanche* — Gilbertson's grandma and the inspiration behind this beautiful show — whose gravelly, occasionally profane, Bette Davis growl is used as the underscore that takes us from song to song in a show that's not only a celebration of the life of an extraordinary woman.; it's also a celebration of the lives of thousands of Albertans who built this province.

We hear *Blanche's* voice thanks to a series of interviews Gilbertson recorded with her grandma to research the show, a song cycle that tells the story of *Blanche's* journey from dust bowl teenager to wife, mother and irrepressible force of nature.

Thanks to those recordings, and a montage of old sepia photographs and home movies that unspool on a screen made of a sheet drying on a laundry line, Gilbertson takes the audience on a musical stroll back through the last eight decades of prairie life, a journey

that includes drought, depression, the Second World War, the oilfields — and the parties.

While *Blanche's* life — like many who lived through those times — featured its share of heartbreak and hardship and loneliness, there was also a pretty good party happening every weekend at *Blanche* and Woody's place.

Gilbertson captures it all, in a vivid collection of songs that range from heartbreaking to let the good times roll.

Sharing the stage with a trio (Jonathan Lewis on clarinet and violin, Jeff Gladstone on guitar and Brian Sanders on cello) of talented musicians, Gilbertson uses her vocal gifts to give us the full spectrum of a prairie pioneer's life, not just the grim, bitter struggle.

For every wistful weeper like *Ballad of Bill*, or *Getting Old Doesn't Pay*, Gilbertson bumps up the energy in the room with uptempo songs like *Sheikie Goes to Hollywood* and *Weekend Parties*.

She has a unique sound — a little bit West Texas, a little bit West Berlin swing (of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht vintage), but it wouldn't be a cabaret without a little bit of Berlin in there, would it?

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Mix in the gorgeous accompaniment of the trio of backup musicians (each of whom takes a turn portraying one of the men in Blanche's life), and you have a song cycle with some genuine prairie kick to it — garnished with a little helping of the old country.

Gilbertson, mixing her costumes between old-school 1930s men's suits and various dresses and slips that conjure up the world of the cabaret more than the foothills, alternates between portraying Blanche and simply being Onalea singing Blanche's life story for the audience.

It all unfolds on a simple set dominated by laundry lines and a few set pieces, that, taken together with the hugely effective multimedia effects, conjure everything from Coronation, Alberta to the shores of Dieppe, where Blanche's Uncle Lloyd landed on his first day of fighting the Second World War.

Mostly, it's a love story between Blanche and Woody, and as it moves through the years, Gilbertson beautifully captures Woody's last days in The Last Football Game, telling a story about him collapsing in the parking lot of McMahon Stadium after a Stamps' game, then cutting off his moustache before he dies.

It's those sorts of details that connect Blanche: The Bittersweet Life of a Wild Prairie Dame so intimately to its Lunchbox audience. All of it is well-directed by former Calgarian (and a Young Canadian colleague of Gilbertson's) Rachel Avery, who has clearly inherited some show business DNA from her dad Bill, the longtime producer of the Stampede Grandstand Show.

As Tuesday's sold-out show wound down to its blackout, one of the Lunchbox ladies, sitting in a wheelchair in the front row, couldn't wait to deliver a verdict.

"That," she more or less announced to the cast — and the audience — "was fabulous!"

It really was.

Review: [High Performance Rodeo](#) and Lunchbox Theatre present [Blanche: The Bittersweet Life of a Wild Prairie Dame at Lunchbox Theatre](#), runs until Jan. 26. Info: [lunchboxtheatre.com](http://lunchboxtheatre.com) or 403-265-4292

Four stars out of five

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