

BLANCHE: THE BITTERSWEET LIFE OF A WILD PRAIRIE DAME * 1/2 out of *******

Michael Giltz – Huffington Post October 13, 2011

What a treat. I walked out of this musical and **bought the lavishly illustrated CD** for \$20. If you knew how broke I was, you'd realize what a compliment that purchase revealed. I was about to tell friends to check it out, when I realized Blanche only had three performances at the festival, with the final show taking place literally minutes after I had seen it. It's a shame such a distinctive piece should be seen so briefly in New York. Here's hoping it returns.

Writer, creator and star Onalea Gilbertson stumbled across a book of her grandmother's photographs. That drew out her grandmother Blanche, who began to tell stories from her life. Gilbertson dug deeper, interviewing her grandmother and taping the results. Then she interviewed her grandfather for his perspective, including his painful memories of World War II that he'd never really discussed before.

The result is this song cycle, delivered with economy and precision on a simple set. Gilbertson and three musicians are on stage. A clothes line is hung across the back, with various garments pegged to it, including a large white bedsheet that doubles as a screen. Video is displayed on it at the start and the end, with photographs of Blanche and her family and friends appearing on it throughout. We hear the recorded voice of Blanche discussing this or that event for a minute and then the band onstage dives into a delicate, penetrating, captivating song.

Scenes are never quite acted out. But bandmembers stand in for the men in her life with easy authority, whether a winning young fellow who never got around to asking Blanche to marry him, the husband who died tragically or the husband back from the war and feeling distant and cold and drawn to drink for a while. Above all, there's Gilbertson, singing a distinctive group of songs about her grandmother's life. They were written mostly by her, with interludes and the music for two songs and arrangements by her and Jonathan Lewis & Morag Northey.

The songs have a plainspoken directness that is wonderfully effective. A typical passage goes like this: "He said Bill starved to death, while/ Del bought the groceries/ He said Bill froze to death.../ He said -- Bill was dead." It's unvarnished, but paired with the right music and Gilbertson's marvelous vocals, it's catchy and memorable and funny and true. You think of Van Dyke Parks or Randy Newman for the songs' Americana roots and perhaps Joni Mitchell for their emotional acuity.

Blanche's story is not wildly unusual or strange: Ronnie was her first love, she worked on the farm of a family when money was tight and fell hard for Bill Gilbertson and his motor bike. He died tragically and Woody brought the bad news...and stayed to woo Blanche in his own sweet time and marry her himself. But every element is precise, every passage is focused and the cast devoted to the work. The modest exception is the post-war song "Scorched Earth," the one tune that is vaguer and less rooted in specifics than the rest. But the rest -- from first to last -- is very strong indeed. It's a simple story beautifully realized. I'd love to see it again and can't wait to see her next project. Until then, at least I have the CD.