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San Diego Repertory Theatre

Todd Salovey crafts a new musical about Pete Seeger

By Pat Launer

Pete **Seeger**. The name conjures up folk songs, protests and politics, commitment to causes and championing the underdog.

A multiple Grammy-winning folk hero, singer/songwriter/activist Pete **Seeger**, in his lifelong quest for peace, understanding, justice and hope, personifies the best of the American spirit.

Born into a musical family (his mother was a music professor, his father an ethnomusicologist), he started out on the ukulele, moved on to the five-string banjo (even wrote a seminal book about it), was on tour by age 20, in 1939, and has been going strong ever since.

Just two months ago, at age 92, Seeger marched with the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators — two canes supporting him, but no less feisty and defiant — accompanied by his grandson, Tao Rodriguez-**Seeger**, also a singer and activist.

Last year, **Seeger** co-wrote (with Lorre Wyatt) and performed a song, “God’s Counting on Me, God’s Counting on You,” a searing commentary on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

And in Jan. 2009, at age 90, **Seeger** was there on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, singing the Woody Guthrie classic, “This Land is Your Land,” with his grandson Tao and Bruce Springsteen, in the finale of Barack Obama’s Inaugural Celebration concert.

Seeger’s songs were mother’s milk to Todd Salovey, associate artistic director of the San Diego Repertory Theatre. And so, honoring his parents and his political idol, Salovey set out to create a new musical, “A Hammer, A Bell and a Song to Sing: The Music of Pete **Seeger**,” premiering at the San Diego Rep, Jan. 7-29).

“His music was my parents’ music,” says Salovey, the new show’s writer and director. “They were involved in some of the same social causes. His music appealed to them in terms of how people should be treated, which corresponded to traditional Jewish values: honoring other people, taking

care of those less fortunate, giving to the community.”

“My dad fashioned himself after Seeger,” Salovey says. “His favorite **Seeger** song was ‘Kisses Sweeter Than Wine,’” co-written with The Weavers, the influential folksinging quartet he co-founded in 1948.

“**Seeger**’s songs were our bedtime songs,” Salovey recalls. “That was our *mama-loshen* [mother tongue]. I always relate Pete **Seeger** to my dad, who even named my brother Peter after him.

“I began to realize the emotional effect those songs had — and still have — on me,” Salovey continues. “Over the past six months, I’ve been grabbing my kids and showing them clips of The Weavers on YouTube. I would just weep each time.

“Those songs are part of the foundation of who I am, what I love and what I believe in. This music is both my moral and artistic legacy, passed down to me from my parents.”

Seeger’s own parents were prosperous and distinguished. He once described them as “enormously Christian, in the Puritan, Calvinist New England tradition.” But Todd Salovey considers him “an honorary Jew.” In fact, one of the Weavers’ earliest hits was the Israeli song, “Tzena, Tzena, Tzena,” which topped the charts for 13 weeks in 1950.

“See?” exclaims Salovey. “There’s even a little Hebrew in the show!”

Not Just a Life Story

“When I started to write this piece,” Salovey explains, “I didn’t want it to be a biography. I wanted it to be about stories, and about the causes. There’s a fabulous projection design that gives a real sense of the cultural periods these songs sprang from. The three actor-musician-singer-performers start with **Seeger**’s civil rights music, then move on to Vietnam War era music, then music about kids and music from Woody Guthrie (1912-1967), like ‘So Long, It’s Been Good To Know You.’”

Inspired by the iconic Guthrie, whose guitar was labeled “This machine kills fascists,” **Seeger**’s banjo was emblazoned with the motto, “This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender.”

Seeger is best known for the seminal songs he wrote (“Turn Turn, Turn”) or co-wrote (“Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “If I Had a Hammer” —

the source of Salovey's show title — both co-written with Lee Hays of The Weavers). And the songs he popularized, especially the spiritual, "We Shall Overcome," that became the anthem of the 1960s Civil Rights movement.

"The through-line of the musical," Salovey says, "is **Seeger's** voice and the censorship he had to fight. I want people to realize how dangerous it was to sing like he did. And how crippling it was to him to be blacklisted during the '50s.

"Many scholars think the blacklisting caused the resurgence of folk music in America. Since **Seeger** was banned from TV, he could only work at high schools, colleges and summer camps. He went around the country playing to young people. And that became their music. Right now, events in the world and the country, on Wall Street and at Civic Center Plaza, are supporting our desire to express the messages of this material: wanting the best for the community and for the country.

"Through all the censorship," Salovey marvels, "**Seeger** stayed authentic.

"The question this show asks is: Do we still believe that we can raise our voices and make a difference in our communities and in our country?"

Seeger's musical, political and philosophical spirit clearly impassions Salovey. But there's one more reason he's putting together this new work.

"It's a Jewish reason. I love the idea of people — strangers — sitting together and singing. We as Jews still understand the power of song to unite a community. And in this show, not only will the audience sing, but in harmony!"

That's highly reminiscent of **Seeger's** mesmerizing, galvanizing performances, which attracted young and old, black and white, rich and poor, and got them all to sing together.

"If this world survives," Pete **Seeger** once said, "I believe that modern, industrialized people will learn to sing again."

Todd Salovey's new show is a step in that direction.

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