



Riders of the Purple Sage debuted at the Arizona Opera in 2017. Tim Trumble



Wild Bill Hickok, Texas Jack Omohundro and Buffalo Bill Cody – thespians. Library of Congress

Taking the stage West

Playwrights take on old, new frontier

By Robert Nott

The wind is howling in Dale Dunn's play *The Big Heartless*, and the wolves are howling with it – because they want to live and stay wild, like the wind.

The piece is set in an isolated cabin in today's Montana, and it deals with a pair of reckless youths who some people think need killing, and the kids' role in trying to help a pair of wild wolves that some others think need killing. It's a play about protecting endangered animals and the wide-open spaces that we love, and it's a story of redemption and hope and loss.

It's a story of the West.

Dunn's play, which recently premiered in Santa Fe, New Mexico, took viewers deep into the heart of that cabin with the help of real wood collected from the surrounding region for use in set construction and video footage to capture the expanse of the West.

"This play has to do with ... what people think of when they think of the West: big sky, open plains, isolation, loneliness, ranchers and wolves," Dunn said. "*The Big Heartless* explores our tendency to lock up or kill anything we fear or don't understand."

The New Mexico-born Dunn is not the only contemporary playwright finding new stories to tell about the West on stage. Despite the challenge of having to transport an audience into

an environment that calls for vast skies, spacious prairies and smoking six-guns, these playwrights strive to draw audiences in with stories of people, past and present, who are driven to do what they do by the pioneer spirit.

They're doing this by either writing works set in the current West – like Red Shuttleworth's *Tumbledown* – or by setting their stories in the past – like Louis Kraft's one-man *Cheyenne Blood*. Julie Jensen, a playwright based in Salt Lake City, is best known for her contemporary plays *Stray Dogs* and *Two-Headed*. Shuttleworth calls her "probably the best living playwright of our West."

Even if some of the themes are familiar, these playwrights can tweak the tropes, add surreal spins, or



Playwright Julie Jensen



reimagine a popular non-Western piece as a theatrical horse opera.

And unlike a movie or book, these pieces all play out live in front of an audience sitting nearby and willing to buy a ticket to go West for an hour or so.

Steve Nevil's *The Night Forlorn*, for example, places two hapless cowpokes in a post-Civil War parcel of desolate land. The two are waiting for someone named Godsford to show up to give them direction. In the interim, they talk, plan a breaking-wind contest, interact with a woman who has a young man tied on the end of a knotted rope and contemplate their place in the West.

When the play premiered at Theatre West in Los Angeles in March 2018, patrons and critics naturally saw it as a Western take on Samuel Beckett's tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*. But Nevil said the ghost of another tragicomedian – writer and director Sam Peckinpah – haunted his writing of the piece. "Not the Sam Peckinpah who made bloody Westerns," Nevil said. "But the poet Sam Peckinpah, who made *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* and *Junior Bonner* and the TV production of *Noon Wine*." That's the kinder, gentler Peckinpah, Nevil said, a man who loved making films about transition, as in his 1962 movie *Ride the High Country*.

The Night Forlorn tackles some of the expected Western themes: friendship, loyalty, the need to create your own destiny in a hostile environment and the aftereffects of a hanging. Though

one character packs a pistol, it's a play without horses, without gun smoke, without a lynch-mob sequence. All of this was a challenge, Nevil said.

"No, we couldn't have horses on stage, so what did we do?" he said. "We acknowledged them. The characters keep asking, 'Where's the horses, how come we don't have horses?' But there were times when I was asking, 'Can't we have even one gun blast in the play?'"

Nevil, who considers the late Sam Shepard the master of contemporary theatrical Western writing, is working on *Come Hither Moon*, set around 1920 and dealing with a girl who serves as a conduit in the romance between a female rancher and her top hand. Seeing plays in the past grab him, he said, and he thinks they grab audiences too: "There's an appeal for theatergoers to see a play that is set in a previous time, something that is somehow comforting to them because things were simpler and the ethical and moral compasses of people were less complicated. That's the beauty of a Western."

Kraft today is best known as a nonfiction writer – he was a 2012 Spur Award finalist for his biography *Ned Wynkoop and the Lonely Road from Sand Creek*. But he started out as an actor on stage and in film.



Louis Kraft plays Ned Wynkoop in a one-man play in *Cheyenne, Oklahoma*. Johnny D. Boggs

"I had quit acting cold turkey in 1985," Kraft said. "The Ned Wynkoop one-man shows [performed in Kansas, California, Colorado and Oklahoma] along with the *Cheyenne Blood* five-week run in California not only allowed me to return to something I loved but presented me with the opportunity to publicize Wynkoop, make people aware of race relations on the frontier during the mid-19th Century, while I enjoyed my life long gone."

In 2017, Arizona Opera premiered the *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Craig Bohmler's adaptation of the often-filmed Zane Grey novel. Zane Grey? Opera? Does that mix? Apparently, yes. Herbert Paine of *Broadway World* said Bohmler's opera could "lay claim to a rightful place in the canon of works about the American West." That canon includes Giacomo Puccini's 1910 transformation of *The Girl of the Golden West*, a 1905 melodrama by David Belasco, into an opera, and Aaron Copland's 1938 ballet *Billy the Kid*. Arizona Opera brought *Riders of the Purple Sage* back for a revival earlier this year.

But one big challenge for playwrights wanting to write about the West on stage is trying to sell producers and audience members on the idea.

"It's really hard to put a Western onstage if it doesn't have a Sam Shepard attached to it," Nevil said.

Shuttleworth, whose *Americana West* short monologues were presented as part of the WWA convention in June in Tucson, Arizona, agrees. "Most American theaters have an overriding, dire goal, and that is survival," Shuttleworth said. "So the tendency of theaters is to perpetrate successful seasons. This means stale musicals, broad comedies, 30-year-old Broadway hits ... creaky community theater, vending-machine pastries."

Still, a recent ambitious and dark revival of a 75-year-old Broadway hit, *Oklahoma!*, in New York City proves that audiences might be comfortable investing time and money into seeing something familiar, even a Western, as long as they know that its

reputation is sound.

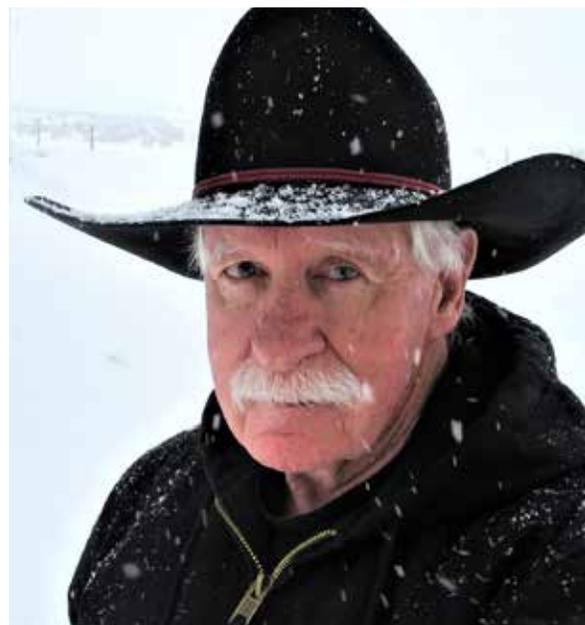
That might explain the moderate success of British playwright Jethro Compton's 2014 stage adaption of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which received mixed but mostly supportive reviews. Compton could not get the rights to the 1962 John Ford film version, so he went back to Dorothy M. Johnson's original short story as source material. In one interview, Compton acknowledged the difficulty of adapting a Western for the stage: "It doesn't easily translate, and you have to create the sense that the world is out there without just using reported action. How can you take the tension of a gun fight and make it verbal?"

He was clearly more successful than producers of a short-lived New York stage adaptation of the 1952 film classic *High Noon*, which was criticized, among other reasons, for eliminating the final gunfight altogether.

Shuttleworth said he considers it "pointless" to write a Western that even resembles a work that has come before. "The point is to do something new, or do something better, or to renew something," he said.

And there's one good reason to write Westerns for the stage, he said: "The West is our American archetype. The West is America."

Of course Americans flocked to see plays set in the West in the 1800s and



Playwright Red Shuttleworth

early 1900s, watching real-life heroes like William Frederick Cody – Buffalo Bill – re-enact their famous exploits on the stage. Historian Sandra K. Sagala reports in her book *Buffalo Bill on Stage* (University of New Mexico Press, 2008), that such “Nineteenth century melodramas embodied distinctly American elements, propagating popular myths about its culture and characters ... characters, either completely good or completely bad, were seldom capable of change.” Cody, she wrote, worked to keep the myth of the West alive on stage, something that American film companies would soon

learn to do on film with the advent of cinema in the early 1900s.

In 1873-74, Cody teamed up with two other famous Westerners, James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok and John “Texas Jack” Omohundro, on a theatrical tour across the country. It was theater of the absurd in the most literal sense. Most reviewers panned the productions, but audiences packed the opera houses.

To American audiences of the time, particularly those living in the East and South, the West “was a strange, mythic place,” Sagala said. “They relished not only news of events that occurred west

of the Mississippi, but lectures and fictional literature. Many of the impressions had come from dime novels that glorified the violence and, yet, [the] genuine American spirit of people who populated what was often portrayed as harsh, unforgiving land.”

As a result, seeing popular Western stories played out before their eyes on a stage helped connect audiences to the West, be it fact or fiction.

In Shuttleworth’s work, the myth and the reality of the West meet head-on, like a couple of adversaries heading for a final showdown.

Tumbledown, for example, offers

What Western films would you like to see on the stage?

By Robert Nott

While contemporary playwrights continue to produce theatrical works set in the new or old West, others have attempted to adapt well-known Western films to the stage – most recently *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (based on the original short story by Dorothy M. Johnson, and not the film version, actually) and *High Noon*.

Roundup Magazine asked eight writers what Western film they would like to see adapted to the stage and why.



Jim Beaver

(Budd Boetticher)

JIM BEAVER, actor, author, playwright, screenwriter.

The Tall T (1957, Columbia Pictures, written by Burt Kennedy and directed by



“*The Tall T* is an excellent candidate for stage production, given the difficulties inherent in a genre rather dependent on horses. But *The Tall T* is relatively contained, with only two vital sets, and it is a story of character as revealed not so much in action as in dialogue, which is the natural linchpin of the theatrical stage. And as most of that dialogue is from the pen of Elmore Leonard’s short story, as adapted by Burt Kennedy, it should be inarguable that it would provide a live audience with both vivid color and a compelling sense of character.”

CHRIS ENSS, *New York Times* best-selling author.

The Furies (1950, Paramount, written by Charles Schnee and directed by Anthony Mann)

“It was the most ambitious and least successful of the three Westerns Anthony Mann made in 1950. It was based on a novel by Niven Busch, author of *Duel in the Sun*. Walter Huston is a cattle baron who rejects the advice of his tomboy daughter, played by Barbara Stanwyck, marries socialite Judith Anderson and

then lets his ranch go to seed. The relationship between the cattle baron and his daughter is delicious. She’s angry that he married such a horrible woman and sets out to make him pay for his mistake. It’s a Greek tragedy with Freudian overtones.”

MICKI FUHRMAN, two-time Spur Award finalist, singer/songwriter.

Cat Ballou (1965, Columbia Pictures, written by Walter Newman and Frank R. Pierson and directed by Elliot Silverstein)

“A young woman, seeking to avenge her father’s murder, hires a washed-up, drunken gunslinger. A handsome fella rounds out the team. No, it’s not *True Grit* and not John Wayne gripping the golden award. But four years prior to the release of *True Grit* (1969) came a raucous western parody called *Cat Ballou*. Jane Fonda and Lee Marvin, who won an Oscar for playing both the bad guy and his bleary-eyed assassin, sparkle in this entertaining, if not deeply plotted, musical comedy. Nat King Cole and Stubby Kaye move the story along as narrator/balladeers. I’d pay to see a staged version of this because *Cat Ballou* brings back fond childhood memo-



Bob Herzberg

ries and because the comedy aspect is a crowd pleaser.”

BOB HERZBERG, actor, comedian and author of several books on film and history.

Quantz (1957,



a West full of the possibility of redemption, even if some of the characters don't take advantage of that offer. In *Tumbledown*, a modern-day outlaw-lawman type converses with a talking stuffed coyote while a seemingly irredeemable youth gets a second chance when he returns from death to earth as Jesus Christ (and a Jesus who doesn't like chocolate cake to boot). The characters, including a retired high school teacher and a guy who drives a Popsicle truck, are Westerners through and through, even though they might not always recognize it.

They're ready to charm, steal and

kill their way through life, all the while aware that the environment around them – the West – plays a role in their choices. The ideas for the play, Shuttleworth said, came “from both personal experience and the imagination.”

Shuttleworth, who lives in the Columbia Basin of Washington state, thinks theater artists who live in the West do not have far to go to mine such themes. “The most fertile field for a playwright is the deep local,” he said. “It is the local, our small towns, ranches, farms and family history, that offer the richest possibilities for a playwright in the American West theatre.”

To Dunn, stories set in the West can appeal to anyone, regardless of where they live, because we all share common stories, regardless of myth, reality or geography. And often we, like the Westerners portrayed in literature, film and theater, are trying to figure it all out and survive.

“We are all moving through these mountains and valleys, through time and space, through difficulty and comforts,” Dunn said. “And the world keeps on spinning in endless circles. The best we can do is try to hold onto it, for dear life.”

Universal, written by Robert Wright Campbell and directed by Harry Keller)

“Starring Fred MacMurray as a philosophical gunfighter, *Quantez* deals with a gang of bank robbers escaping a posse who end up in an abandoned saloon in the ghost town of Quantez. Outside of the chase scene at the beginning and the escape from Apaches at the end, much of the film is William Inge meets Anthony Mann as the characters talk about their dreams, fight and guard against Apache marauders outside. There's also an outstanding performance by Michael Ansara as real-life Apache chief, Delgadito. Broadway, what're you waiting for?”

MICHAEL LEE, author of the “Del Rio” series, due to be released in December.



Michael Lee

The Shootist (1976, Paramount, written by Miles Swarthout and Scott Hale, based on a novel by Glendon Swarthout and

directed by Don Siegel)

“This film would lend itself [onstage] to different scenes in the town. A great dramatic story with hot-shooting action at the end and the death of a man you despise and love in the same breath. There's the young boy on the verge of manhood watching this myth of a man face his looming death with honor and dignity and a good strong woman's role as well.”

SUSAN D. MATLEY, 2011 Spur



Susan D. Matley

Award finalist for Best Western Song.

My Darling Clementine (1946, 20th Century-Fox, written by Samuel G. Engle and Winston Miller from a story by Sam Hellman and directed

by John Ford)

“Despite serious departures from history, *My Darling Clementine* has all the elements of a gripping good yarn: good versus evil, romantic triangles, hot- and cold-blooded revenge and a Shakespearean soliloquy! The ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys come in shades of gray, adding philosophical depth. With some trimming to the script (I'd cut the character of Chihuahua, for example), imaginative staging (back projections for big outdoor scenes, multiple sets on turntables, sepia-tone costumes, excellent lighting and sound a must, a live harmonica, fiddle and piano) this play could be a sensory feast.”

STEVE NEVIL, actor and playwright whose most recent work, *The Night Forlorn*, was produced at Theatre West in Los Angeles.

The Ox-Bow Incident (1943, 20th Century-Fox, written by Lamarr Trotti, based on a novel by Walter Van Tilberg Clark and directed by William Wellman)

“*The Ox-Bow Incident* has a lot of contemporary themes that speak to today. We're looking at mob rule and groups of people being indicted by buttons that push people's emotional responses. I love that movie so much. You could take the novel or movie script and do it as a one-night staged reading to see if anyone would bite and want to mount a production.”

RED SHUTTLEWORTH, playwright and three-time Spur Award-winner for poetry.

Larry McMurtry's *Hud* (1963, Paramount, written by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr. and directed by Martin Ritt)

“The character Hud is a forefather of a Western sensibility that includes Sam Shepard, Waylon Jennings and Ray Wylie Hubbard. The questions raised by Larry McMurtry in *Horseman, Pass By* are still with us: Who and what will hold sway. The Texas of McMurtry's *Hud*, and generally the High Plains, are not so different as they were half a century ago. We never fully resolve who owns the West or even address how we should treat each other.”

