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Town Hall Theater Reins In 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance'

By Sophie Braccini



From left, Jim (Terrance Smith), Ransome (Nate Smith), and Hallie (Heather Kellogg).

Photo provided

Town Hall Theater's latest show opened on Oct. 1, a unique animal of a play that surprises, and masterfully carries out its audience to a different plain.

Forget the namesake James Stewart and John Wayne movie. The characters here are talking of a different time but with overtones that ring strangely familiar. The bad guy is uncomfortably seductive, the tough cowboy is vulnerable, and the white knight has its own ambiguities. And let's not forget the central lady, a very strong female character who has enough love for two men at the same time.

The play is an intimate Western drama. It opens with the burial of Bert Barricune in the small Western village of Two-Tree, with Senator Ransome Foster in attendance. Everyone wonders why this Washington politician has come to say farewell to this old cowboy. The second scene takes us years back, when Foster first came to Two-Tree, when Barricune saved his life and, in his own words, made him the man he is today.

The story is, of course, a traditional plot of good against evil, of courage and self-sacrifice. It also tells us what libertarianism pushed to the extreme can breed, what is the power of education and why

those who feed on ignorance would kill those who dare start to learn and dream. It also speaks about the Western frontier at the end of the 19th century when Eastern lawmakers and administrators tried to rein in behaviors. Interestingly, it can leave the spectator wondering about the real morality of the characters. The ones who cheat most in the play may not be the bad guys.

Dennis Markam, the managing director at Lafayette's Town Hall, directs the play. He explains that it was first a 1953 short story by Dorothy M. Johnson, an early and mid-20th century writer known for her Western-fiction stories, often inspired by interviews with Western old-timers and Native Americans (Montanawomenhistory.org). Markham adds that the play is closer to the original text than the 1962 John Ford movie.

"From the start, people familiar with the movie will notice the differences in the characters, and it is for the best," explains Markam.

Westerns often evoke large spaces and horse cavalcades. On stage it isn't possible, but the spirit of adventure is instead carried over by the actors' charisma that at times takes the play to epic intensity.

Markam says he was able to assemble a really interesting cast that could bring characters to life and fill it in very interesting ways. "There are some familiar faces like Heather Kellogg who plays Hallie Jackson, but for most everyone else it is their first time here," says Markam.

Markam directs the play with a very clear vision of moments that he wants to see, but if actors are not comfortable with it, he gets their feedback. He adds that there are moments in the play at Town Hall that are not necessarily in the script but that the actors pulled apart and formed themselves. "These are some of my favorite moments," he adds, such as when Liberty Valance appears in the show, at the end of the first act and toward the middle of the second.

Indeed the character of Liberty Valance is one of the most seductive in the play. He is ruthless and cynical, but also smart, logical and very human. Kyle Goldman makes a superb Valance full of stage presence, the perfect dark angel.

He is not the only very solid actor of the play. All give a rich palette of emotions. Kellogg is a rough blunt country girl, with a powerful voice. There is no taming of the shrew in this play. She is a dragon at the beginning of the play and stays that way, even if love softens her, there is no submission or surrendering.

The opposition between the cowboys' ways represented by Erin Gould as Bert Barricune and Nathaniel Smith as Ransome Foster has a good balance of force. They present a very believable male dynamic where rivalry is tempered by respect, and finally sealed by a common lie.

The play will run through Oct. 22. Tickets and more information are available at townhalltheater.org.

Actresses in Alameda Play

By Cathy Dausman



From left, Sally Hogarty and Kathy Ferber are Lamorinda actresses in an upcoming presentation of "Our Town" in Alameda. Photo Cathy Dausman

Two Lamorinda actresses will perform in an upcoming presentation of "Our Town" at Alameda's Altarena Theater. Kathy Ferber, of Moraga takes on a shared role as one of three Stage Managers; Sally Hogarty, of Canyon, plays Mrs. Webb.

The two have performed in a variety of live theater presentations; they met on the set of a late

1990s' performance of "My Fair Lady" in Walnut Creek. Our Town, Thornton Wilder's American drama classic spans 13 years in the mythical turn-of-the 19th century town of Grover's Corners. This version, directed by Clay David includes period music. For tickets or details, call (510) 523-1553 or visit www.altarena.org online.

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