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Journey back to the Wild West in *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band* at The Rose

(OMAHA, Nebr.) The Wild West rides again in the world premiere of ***Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band***, playing Jan. 23 - Feb. 8, 2015, at The Rose Theater. This historical adventure play retells the adventures of legendary showman Buffalo Bill, as seen through the eyes of his daughter, Irma - and with a good dose of cowboy music and humor thrown in for good measure.

Written by Omaha playwright Max Sparber, ***Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*** shares highlights of William Cody's life as an adventurer, cowboy, buffalo hunter, Pony Express rider and master showman. Sparber pored through old newspapers and biographies of the western celebrity, focusing especially on Cody's time spent in Nebraska and the Omaha area. "Because Buffalo Bill's history was so intimately linked with so many stories from the west, learning about him was like taking a one-man tour of the Wild West," Sparber says.

Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band is the result of a brainstorm of Rose artistic director Matthew Gutshick. Gutshick envisioned a series of new plays that would put local artists at the center of telling local stories with national and universal resonance, and ***Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*** marks the first production in the series. "Buffalo Bill represented an entire era in regional and national history, but he was also an incredibly difficult person to cast in a single mold," says Gutshick. "I wanted to bring some of the nuances of his story to life along with his epic image. Max, as a historian himself, was the perfect playwright to begin this series of new plays."

Buffalo Bill Cody was born in Iowa and spent his early years in Kansas. Many of his earliest adventures, such as his time with the Pony Express, were in Nebraska. His world-renown Wild West show debuted in Omaha, launching an entertainment phenomenon that would eventually tour the globe and come to define the world's image of the cowboy hero. ***Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*** attempts to give audiences a small glimpse of the man who became a legend.

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Gutshick explains that he hopes the play will encourage audiences to formulate personal moral judgments that stand on history rather than myth. "This play is not simply a glorification of the cowboy mythology; it examines it from many different perspectives while giving audiences a fun and funny tour of Buffalo Bill's world. Audiences will experience the thrill of meeting Buffalo Bill and some of the larger than life performers he had in his Wild West exhibition," he says.

Sparber admits translating a historical figure's life into a story for the stage can be a daunting endeavor. "It's very challenging, because you are responsible for both representing somebody's life accurately and also for creating a fiction inspired by it," he says. "Fortunately, Buffalo Bill himself, because he was a showman and his shows were inspired by his life, had already wrestled with that question quite a lot, and he had developed a lot of theatrical tools for telling his story, and the story of the West, that I was able to adapt to this play."

Director Amy Lane sees Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band as a show about a father and a daughter. Picking up at a point in Buffalo Bill's life when he was considered the most famous man on earth, ***Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*** is told through the point-of-view of Cody's eleven-year-old daughter Irma, who just wants to know her pa. The man beneath the legend is gradually revealed as she travels with her father on a train to her school in Omaha, Brownell Hall (now Brownell-Talbot School).

"William Cody's daughters went to Brownell back when it was an all girls' school, and we were excited to explore this local connection to our community," says Gutschick. "We partnered with Brownell-Talbot School to develop the script. Readings and play discussions with fourth- and fifth-graders informed revisions of the piece as we approached a performance draft of the script."

In addition to their involvement with the script production, Brownell-Talbot students from all grades were introduced to aspects of theater ranging in focus from dance and choreography to playwriting and technical theater through educational workshops and artist residencies. Every Brownell-Talbot student will see the finished play and participate in a post-show workshop with Rose education staff as a part of this unique partnership.

Students responded enthusiastically to the script, which incorporates the tradition of cowboy poetry. While not a musical, portions of the show use verse and cowboy music to convey the storyline.

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"I think stories for children are often especially well-suited to making use of verse -- most of my favorite children's books are written, in part or whole, in verse. But also there is a tradition of cowboy poetry that I really enjoy and respect, and one of the big annual cowboy poetry events is in Cody, Wyoming (the town that Buffalo Bill established), and so it seemed especially appropriate for this show," says Sparber.

Director Lane expertly weaves together a story that is part historical fact and part tall tale into an entertaining hour that will delight families of all ages. "This show brings to life so many of Buffalo Bill's stories: his experiences with a trick shooter, Wild Bill Hickok's race against a train, cowboy sing-a-longs," she says. "I particularly love the Pony Express race across the plains with Death at his heels. It is really fun and just a little bit spooky, and something the kids are going to love."

And you can't forget about the train. "It's not often that we have a train onstage. Watching Wild Bill Hickok trying to beat a train in a foot race is pretty funny," Lane says.

While the show definitely brings its share of humor with a western flair, audiences will also learn about Cody's commitment to preserving the legend of the West as a true example of the spirit of America. "Our playwright has emphasized Buffalo Bill's commitment to protecting the land, the buffalo, and our national historic past. Buffalo Bill was ultimately an environmentalist and conservationist," explains Lane. "Yes, he was a hunter, but he later worked hard to ensure the buffaloes' survival, something that we include in the stories."

As an added bonus to Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band, audience members can view informational lobby displays from the Buffalo Bill Center of the West that examine Cody's history as an actor, his relationship with Omaha and Council Bluffs, and his relationship with his daughters. Prior to each Sunday performance, University of Nebraska at Omaha history professor Elaine Marie Nelson will share a pre-show presentation on William Cody and how his exhibition changed America, affecting us to this very day.

Gutschick hopes the play both delights and educates. "I hope audiences are able to have a lot of fun experiencing a world that is rarely seen onstage, that being a particularly wild version of the West. While doing so, I hope young people begin to think about the power the stories we tell one another have to change our community," he says.

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Opening night attendees will be treated to pre-show performances by wandering cowboy crooners and trick ropers. A full-size stagecoach will be available for picture-taking outside the theater, courtesy Wells Fargo Bank.

"In a lot of ways, this show gathers together everything I like about the classic cowboy story, so it should be an awful lot of fun," says Sparber.

Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band should delight families with children ages 6 and up with its western wit and cowboy charm. The show runs Jan. 23 - Feb. 8, 2015, with performances Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm and 5 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm.

Tickets are \$18 per person. Discount ticket vouchers are available at all area Hy-Vee stores for \$14 each. Members of The Rose receive four free tickets to the production.

Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Baird Holm, Kiewit Companies Foundation, the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, the National Endowment for the Arts, Mid-America Arts Alliance, and Humanities Nebraska. Opening night activities are sponsored by Kids Love Stickers, Powered by MediBadge.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education. The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year.

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