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'Gunsmoke' meets 'The Addams Family' in Western/horror spoof

by M. M. Adjarian

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What do you get when you cross the elements of pulp fiction westerns with the blood, guts and gore of horror films like *Carrie* or *The Exorcist*? According to playwright Jane Martin, the opportunity to mix-and-match genre-based clichés and generate outrageous theatrical comedy, of the kind she creates in her 2001 play, **Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage**.

Well-respected as she is in American theatre, Martin is something of an enigma. Nearly 30 years after her first play, *Talking With...* debuted at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, no one is entirely sure who Martin is... or if she is even a woman. The Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright has never appeared in public nor has she ever granted an interview.

Many critics have speculated that Martin is a pseudonym for Jon Jory, the now-retired Artistic Director of the Actor's Theatre, who, from the start, has served as Martin's "spokesperson." Others have suggested that Martin's plays - a few of which address explicitly gender-based issues such as abortion - are a collaboration between Jory and his wife, Marcia Dixey. Through all the controversies that have raged around Martin's identity, Jory has remained cheerfully tight-lipped and elusive.

Flaming Guns, which also premiered at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville, has been described as "the Addams family version of *Gunsmoke*." Largely staged in regional theaters, the play remains one of Martin's lesser-known pieces. On July 9, Theatre Three, Inc. of Dallas, an uptown playhouse dedicated to innovative theatrical programming, will mount a new production that will run for four weeks.



Emily Jackson and Justin Vorpah in Theatre Three's 'Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage' (Source:Ken Birdsell)



L-R: Sally Soldo, Gene Raye Price, Emily Jackson and Justin Vorpah in Theatre Three's 'Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage' (Source:Ken Birdsell)

Laugh out loud funny

Flaming Guns centers around Big-8 (Gene Ray Price), an embittered female ex-rodeo competitor, who has retired to a small rented house in Wyoming. In her new role as nurse for injured rodeo stars, she meets - and beds - Rob-Bob (Justin Vorpah), a young man with delusions of his own cowboy heroism. Big 8's lusty peace is shattered early one morning when She-Devil (Emily Jackson) comes bursting through the door, furious that she has been left pregnant and abandoned by Big 8's absent son, Lucifer Lee. Obsessively following She-Devil is her hatchet-toting Ukrainian biker lover, Black Dog (Jordan Willis), who, in a fit of jealous rage, has cut off one of She-Devil's hands. In the comic mayhem that follows - and which includes appearances by Shirl (Sally Soldo), Big 8's sister - a butcher at a local slaughterhouse, and her slow-witted Deputy Sheriff boyfriend Baxter (Dan Ramsey) - Rob-Bob becomes smitten with

She-Devil and commits murder in the name of justice. The result is an uproarious spatter-fest that skewers the conventions of two beloved story and film genres.

Theatre Three veteran Terry Dobson will direct the play in all its campy glory. Dobson, who has been an active member of the T3 staff since 1980, is the current Music Director and Company Manager. His numerous and impressive career achievements include a Leon Rabin Award for Outstanding Musical Direction for *Jon & Jen* as well as a DFW Theatre Critic Forum Award for *My Private Diva*, a play he both wrote and performed. When I interviewed him about *Flaming Guns*, Dobson, in keeping with his multi-talented, theatrical multi-tasking image, was doing

rehearsals for Martin's play and final performances for another T3 production, Beehive.

EDGE: Why did Theatre Three decide to stage one of Jane Martin's minor plays and how do you see it as fitting in with Theatre Three's vision?

Terry Dobson: I don't think our producer even thought about the fact that it was a "lesser known" work by Jane Martin... One of our senior staff members brought the script in to be considered and all of us read it and thought it would be a fun summer production to do for our audiences. I fell in love with the script when I read it. It was one of the first scripts in a very long time that made me laugh out loud! I was sitting in the middle of Rocco's Pizza and couldn't stop laughing... I'm sure the other diners were irritated!!!

EDGE: What has been the appeal of directing Flaming Guns?

Dobson: I've loved this directing assignment. Most of my assignments are related to musicals - I am after all T3's resident Musical Director and my main focus over the past 30 years has been the musical productions - but I've also acted in many, many comedies and I guess Jac (Alder, the Executive Producer-Director at Theatre Three) thought this would be a good fit for me. I've always loved the old Westerns and after auditions, when I was able to assemble a terrific cast, I really got into the whole "Cowboy Code" and skewed morality of Jane Martin's hysterically funny Flaming Guns world!



L-R: Sally Soldo and Gene Raye Price in Theatre Three's 'Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage' (Source:Ken Birdsell)

Who is Jane Martin?

EDGE: Is this your first theatrical encounter with playwright Jane Martin and what do you think of the controversy surrounding "her" identity?

Dobson: Yes, this is my first experience with a Jane Martin script. I love the humor - dark and twisted - definitely the kind of stuff that makes me laugh! I, personally, am not bothered by the controversy surrounding her identity. If "Jane Martin" is just a pseudonym for Jon Jory (as someone suggested), then he obviously has his reasons to us and other theaters that might produce a Jane Martin piece.

EDGE: Are you a fan of either B-grade Westerns or horror movies? Has either one (or both) of these types of films been an inspiration to

you in the mounting of this production?

Dobson: I grew up watching all those old Westerns. I've never been a big fan of horror movies, though. I would always get nightmares after sitting through some gory horror film. I do like suspense movies, but don't really like the "gore." The unexpected twist in Flaming Guns doesn't bother me because there is so much humor leading up to it. This is one of those scripts that you really can't predict... It takes turns and twists that are so unexpected. I think audiences will really have a good time on this wild, hysterically funny roller coaster ride!

EDGE: Have you, as the director, played up any particular aspect of Flaming Guns?

Dobson: The comedy, of course! I love the complete innocence of Rob Bob and his strict adherence to the "Code of the West" and then he falls madly in love with this edgy, punk rock, sexually charged, strange girl who shows up in the middle of the night being pursued by a Ukrainian Hell's Angel Biker Dude... and then there is Shirl (the sister of Big 8), a western version of June Cleaver who slaughters pigs and is engaged to a Barney Fife Deputy Sheriff who has troubles in the sex department.... The characters and situations are hysterically funny and then as the plot unfolds, it just gets wilder and crazier and sooooo fun!

EDGE: What have been some of the challenges in mounting this production?

Dobson: The blood and gore as the plot thickens! And some of the physical comedy has been tricky to make work.

EDGE: What have you most enjoyed about serving as the director for this piece?

Dobson: The cast is TERRIFIC! We've had such a good time... laughing most of the way! I was able to cast some long-time Theatre Three favorites as well as some new faces making their debut on our stage.

EDGE: Do you think there's a particular kind of an audience with which Flaming Guns would most resonate?

Dobson: I think any audience who enjoys comedy and loves to be surprised by unexpected plot developments will find *Flaming Guns* to be a terrific evening's entertainment.

Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage runs July 9 to August 8 at the Theatre Three at 2800 Routh Street in Dallas, Texas. Performances are Mondays at 7:30 (July 12 only), Thursdays at 7:30PM (except July 15), Fridays at 7:30PM, Saturdays at 8:00 PM and Sundays at 2:30PM and 7:30PM. Ticket prices range from \$20 to \$30 and are available by calling (214) 871-3300 or by going online at boxoffice@heatre3dallas.com. Half-price rates are available for subscribers.

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