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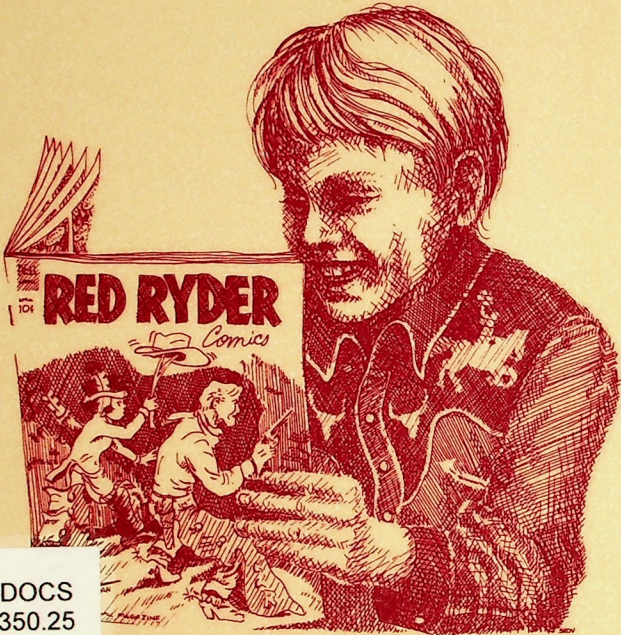
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MARK MEDOFF

by Rudolf Erben



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Mark Medoff

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INTRODUCTION

Mark Medoff grew up in the East, lives in the New West, but dreams of the Old West. In his essay "Adios, Old West," he nostalgically calls himself a "child of the Old West" (1). Medoff's protagonists likewise romanticize the Western American past because they associate it with their own youthful innocence. But they learn to live with the far less romantic realities of an increasingly easternized West. Like Medoff, they know that cowboys can no longer be role models. While they regret the decline of the heroic tradition, they realize that they cannot emulate outdated stereotypes. In his drama, Medoff redefines the Western heroic tradition and creates new myths for the New West.

Medoff's ambivalent view of the Western American myth reflects shifting interpretations of the West since the 1960s. Like other Western writers of his generation, Medoff was shaped by the mythic West portrayed in numerous cowboy movies and television series of the 1950s. The frontier epic continues to fascinate him because in the Old West there was no doubt as to who was good and who was bad; in the end, good always defeated evil. Also, men on the frontier were "men" and we could always rely on them to save us "in the face of peril" ("Adios, Old West" 2). In the New West, by contrast, Medoff misses not only a reasonable code of living, but also heroes to look up to.

The Vietnam War, domestic riots, and women's liberation crushed the essentially masculine myth of the Old West. In an in-

interview with Eithne Johnson, Medoff maintains that Americans in Vietnam “killed” the Western code embodied by “John Wayne and Roy and Hoppy and the Durango kid” (57). In addition to losing a war, Americans lost their innocence, idealism, and heroes. After Vietnam, Medoff writes in “Adios, Old West,” nobody “wearing a pearl-handled six-gun and riding a handsome horse could gallop into American life anywhere and save anyone” (2). Instead, America’s defeated gunslingers crawled back into American life, only to find that the women’s movement added to their sense of their own emasculation. Women refused to be saved by men unable to save their own manhood.

In his drama, Medoff reinterprets the myth of the West based on a new concept of heroism. In what I call his “hero and heroine plays,” Medoff abandons outmoded stereotypes of both men and women in favor of a more diversified heroism, one combining Old Western morality with New Western gender roles. In his hero plays—including his first New York hit, *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* (1973)—disillusioned men give up their reliance on mythic Western popular culture heroes in favor of women and families. In his heroine plays—including *The Wager* (1974) and the Broadway success *Children of a Lesser God* (1979)—modern women fight against outdated role models and men’s inflated egos to become more assuredly themselves.

Two types of male characters recur in Medoff’s drama. One is the violent intellectual, Medoff’s version of the “bad guy” in the popular Western. Obsessively macho, he terrorizes men and women in an effort, as Paul Sagona says, to “gratify himself physically and psychologically” (83). Medoff’s bad men use both phalluses and phallic symbols to express their masculinity. They not only carry guns, they also wield language like a weapon. Combining physical action with verbal dexterity, they fuse Old Western with New Western traits.

Medoff's good guys are equally torn between the present and the past. Young, innocent, and insecure, they continue the tradition of the Western cowboy who prefers the range to towns and cities, and who would rather be with sidekicks instead of women. Guided by mentors such as Red Ryder or Laredo Kid, Medoff's confused adolescents are, as Jack Kroll puts it, nevertheless haunted by a constant sense of "failure, fear and foreboding" (60). They grow up only when they dissociate themselves from their mentors and face the challenges of a new reality, one that includes women. Medoff thus introduces a new view of the Western hero. As he explains in an interview with Rudolf Erben, the contemporary "cowboy" must be an "adequate husband, father, human being" (5).

If his narcissistic heroes are often "stumps" (i.e., people who are wounded either physically or spiritually or both), Medoff's heroines play similar limited roles as "children of a lesser god." Many of his female characters continue the Old Western tradition of the helpless rescue who finds it hard to adjust to new gender roles. Especially in Medoff's early work up to the mid-1970s, the women are often naive, plain by-standers at male conflicts. They uncritically adore men who rarely return the affection. Since *Children of a Lesser God*, Medoff has created stronger female characters. His new heroines not only assert themselves but also teach men responsibility and humanity. In Medoff's more recent drama, then, men and women alike search for identity, and they struggle with new roles.

Like Medoff himself, his characters draw strength from living in the Southwest. They are firmly rooted in smalltown Texas and New Mexico, the setting for most of Medoff's works. And yet they realize that the land no longer provides a sanctuary. In "Adios, Old West," Medoff blames insensitive Easterners for transforming the rural Southwest:

Farmland in Las Cruces is being sold as fast as developers will buy it, to build on and resell to mainly eastern people (an easterner being anyone who lives east of Texas or west of New Mexico). These easterners grew up on western movies and TV series and are moving "out West" from back East. In many cases the easterners do not come gracefully. They seem to resent the desire on the part of any of the natives to preserve anything of what was. The easterners bring many of their acquired incivilities with them and I've noticed a change in what was once an almost unerring politeness among many people out here in New Mexico. Needless to say, more and more out West is starting to resemble back East. (10)

Medoff's characters too yearn for life in harmony with the land, despite their awareness that they cannot exist apart from industrial society. In the "Red Ryder" trilogy—*When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* (1973), *The Heart Outright* (1986), and *Stumps* (1989)—Stephen Ryder journeys from his New Mexico home to the East, and later from the Far East back to the West. His epic journey clearly recalls frontier experience. Stephen ultimately settles down with his family in a small house on the river. Central to *The Majestic Kid* (1981) is the conflict between the Westerners' need to preserve the land and the Easterners' wish to develop. The desecration of the land is an important theme in Medoff's drama, paralleling the death of the heroic myth.

BIOGRAPHY AND EARLY WORKS

Mark Howard Medoff, a third-generation Jewish-American, was born on 18 March 1940, in Mount Carmel, Illinois. Because his father was the only physician in this town of less than two thousand people, Medoff enjoyed a privileged childhood. His fond memories

of smalltown life also help to explain his persistent refusal to leave his home in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Although the theater and, more recently, his film work require him to travel to New York City and Los Angeles frequently, Medoff has little love for either place. Moreover, as he explains to Eithne Johnson, he likes to prove that he can be successful as a playwright while living in and writing about the West (50).

An understanding of his parents, Lawrence R. Medoff and Thelma Butt Medoff, is crucial to an understanding of Medoff's work. In particular, Medoff's father was somebody he could look up to, an ideal who later became the prototype for Medoff's heroes. Like them, Lawrence Medoff has often struggled to combine excellence in one role with adequacy in others. He has excelled as a doctor more easily than as husband, father, and son. Thelma Butt Medoff shares many traits with Medoff's heroines. In middle age she transformed herself from wife and helpmate to a modern woman with her own career as a psychologist. Also, she encouraged Medoff to write when he lost confidence in himself in his early twenties, and she has remained one of his best friends.

His close yet competitive relationship with his brother Bud also informs Medoff's work. Medoff recalls inventing his asthma the very moment his brother was born. For many years, the two brothers played cowboys every day, but, being older, Mark usually insisted on playing the hero who would ride to somebody's rescue. Both shared "dreams of the West, of going to Montana, riding the range, being a hero, coming up to the bar and ordering milk" (Erben 2). Medoff also remembers a nightmarish incident that occurred during those childhood games. One day a playmate shot Medoff with a BB-gun, missing his eye by a millimeter. Similarly traumatic moments, in which men face off or point a gun into somebody's face, occur in many of Medoff's dramas. Gunplay, like

physical action, is important to Medoff's work and complements the intellectual exchange between characters.

Playing cowboy and his childhood relationship with his brother are the main subjects in Medoff's autobiographical one-act play *The War on Tatem* (1973). In the play two very untough looking gangs of children fight a "war" in order to determine the ruler of Tatem Waterway Drive in Miami Beach. The contenders are Louie Dunbar, the narrator and commander-in-chief of the Tatem Perch, and King Myron of the neighboring gang. Averse to violence, Louie decides to concede the fort and his guns to Dunbar, but he steadfastly refuses to turn over his Roy Rogers comic book collection. The two leaders start a fight, and Boosy saves Louie by hitting Myron with a gun. The play's action concludes years later. During a basketball game, Louie repays Boosy for his heroic rescue. He hits an opponent for intentionally fouling Boosy, thereby ending the war on Tatem. Medoff explains the play's autobiographical impulse in the preface: "My brother Bud would have done no less than Boosy Dunbar to avenge his brother's humiliation" (xiv).

During his school years in Miami in the 1950s, Medoff's romantic view of the West suffered a blow. Nurtured on the orderly and ritualized violence of the Old West, Medoff for the first time consciously experienced the threat of global annihilation in the nuclear age. He vividly remembers the relentless air raid drills and the ubiquitous bomb shelters of his youth. As a student at Miami Beach High School, Medoff substituted athletic heroes for mythological ones. As a freshman, he started on the school's football and basketball teams and found a new role model in Dodgers center fielder "Duke" Edwin Donald Snider. While he seemed to have lost interest in types such as Red Ryder and the Lone Ranger, Medoff's sports heroes, in fact, mirror his Western heroes. He writes in "The Locker-Room Kid" that an athlete "neither smokes, drinks, uses foul language, nor messes around indiscrimi-

nately with women" (190). Like a cowboy who abides by the Code of the West, an athlete is somebody to "depend on, look up to, believe in" (191).

Medoff began to write in high school. He received an A+ in tenth grade for a short story in which a teenager kills someone and goes to prison. Upon graduation from high school, Medoff enrolled in the University of Miami, where he developed his writing skills and received his B.A. in English in 1962. In his freshman year, Medoff penned what became his first and last published short story. In "One Blind Mouse," a story that already makes use of many elements that will later characterize Medoff's drama, two adolescents kill six people. The story centers on an innocent young man who, guided by a cynical mentor, learns about a world gone mad. His initiation includes rebellion through murder and violence against women. Still, "One Blind Mouse" ends with a plea for a better world. Don, the first-person narrator, concludes, "I need a prayer answered bad. I would pray for sanity. Do you understand? Sanity" (196).

Before going to graduate school at Stanford University, Medoff spent two years in Washington, D.C. Uncertain about his plans for the future, he did what many of his heroes do: he followed a buddy—in this case, one who had been admitted to law school at American University. In Washington, Medoff wrote "bad prose" at night and worked during the day as assistant director of admissions and supervisor of publications for a technical institute. A car accident ended his interest in the cold, cruel "real world" and he opted for university life. Determined to become a successful writer, Medoff enrolled in Stanford's creative writing program in 1964 and graduated with an M.A. in 1966. In "Home Movie," he remembers his time at Stanford as "a year of sincere tennis (the first year) and a year of colitis and psychotherapy (the second)" (29).

Medoff's master's thesis, a novel called *The Savior*, turned into his first full-length play, and it was eventually the second to be

produced in a professional venue. Under the new title *The Kramer*, the work premiered in San Francisco in October 1973. Though not a Western play, *The Kramer* is very important to an understanding of Medoff's work. For the first time in his writing, a naive and innocent "blue collar" type faces the challenge of a cold and violent intellectual, whom he adores. But like Stephen in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, Art Malin abandons his hero worship upon discovering the inhumanity in his supposed "savior." Bart Kramer dresses like a "human being" but lacks humanity. He orders Malin to divorce his wife and treat everybody else with contempt. In the end, Malin makes love to his wife, rebels against his mentor, and challenges Kramer to meet him "face to face." Yet Kramer shuns a face-off with the invigorated Malin and, like Medoff's mythic heroes, disappears into another sphere.

Medoff did not write drama until he started teaching at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces in 1966. For many years, Medoff saw his position as professor of English and Drama as merely a way to support himself while pursuing his writing career. From early on, writing has had a therapeutic effect on Medoff, who has not suffered from colitis nor needed therapists since leaving Stanford. Consequently, he gladly accepted the position of dramatist-in-residence at New Mexico State University in 1975.

Medoff's growing love of teaching has also influenced his work. Many of Medoff's heroes are either teachers or variations thereof—fathers, priests, mentors, directors. By virtue of these roles, they command authority but frequently renounce it by the end of the play, usually once they learn to accept women as equals. In Medoff's drama as well as his life, teachers are often taught by students. Medoff says in "Swan Song": "Kids, my own and other people's, have changed my life, made me want to look at our inhospitable world and find something positive about it" (15). Medoff's love of and respect for children have resulted in four chil-

dren's plays: *The Odyssey of Jeremy Jack* (1974), *Kringle's Window* (1985), *Big Mary* (1989), and *Stephanie Hero* (1991).

Another major source of inspiration for Medoff has been his family. After a brief marriage to Vicky Eisher, Medoff married the editor Stephanie Thorne in Las Cruces in June 1972. They have three daughters, Debra Ann, Rachel Celeste, and Jessica Lynn. Medoff credits his family for the shift in his work from nihilism to optimism, from male-dominated plays to dramas with equally strong male and female characters. He says in "Adios, Old West" that he stopped recording the death of the Western myth and started creating "a mythology out of the past into the present which they can respect, a tradition of heroism to which they can aspire" (13).

Finally, life in the rural Southwest has shaped Medoff's work. He tells Johnson about the contrasts in New Mexico that he first encountered in 1966 and that still fascinate him:

When I first arrived here at New Mexico State University, I pulled the car over at the Ag. Farm. I walked to the fence and there was this herd of cattle right on campus. I didn't know what to say. I was traveling with a young woman and I looked at her and said, "Cows." That seemed to sum everything up. There were cows on the campus and a Jewish kid from Miami Beach, Florida. (50)

To Medoff, New Mexico is still part of the Old West, a place where he can realize the old pastoral dream. On five acres of pasture land, he lives "both in the city and the country," surrounded by "some vision of open spaces, a little land, some residual pioneering spirit, some residual old West civility" (Erben 3). In two early experimental one-act plays, Medoff addresses other aspects of Southwestern life—cultural interaction and stereotyping. In the yet unproduced *The Ultimate Grammar of Life*, a Jewish college professor fails to satisfy his young, attractive wife. So she goes off

with the erotic and macho Mexican American, who better knows the "ultimate grammar of life."

Of his one-act plays, *Doing a Good One for The Red Man* (1969) is clearly the most significant. Like Arthur Kopit's Broadway success *Indians* from the same year, Medoff's "Civil Rights drama" attacks the Anglo's continuing destruction of the land and Indian way of life in the Southwest. The play's setting, Hollywood, Arizona, near the Grand Canyon, suggests that to many Anglos the West is still predominantly a stage set composed of picturesque scenery and dancing Indians with tom-toms. Thus, the Civil Rights activist Leonard accuses a Navajo, whom he sees barely making a living selling pictures and pottery, of being "hired." Subsequently, he and his wife Grace make plans to buy him out and rent him to Frontierland. Leonard's further plans include restructuring the Indian's slumping "business" by adding an "authentic Indian miniature golf course" as well as a car wash and a burrito stand. The play and the Navajo's patience end when Grace adds insult to injury by claiming that she and Leonard are "doing a good one for the red man." The red man reacts by doing a good one for them: he picks up a gun and shoots them.

THE HERO PLAYS

In his hero plays, Medoff shows that the Vietnam War and women's liberation caused much of the decline of the heroic myth and resulting male insecurities. Many contemporary Westerners, haunted by what John G. Cawelti calls a "sense of eroding masculinity" (86), react against secret fears of emasculation in the same way cowboys did. Such threatened males insist on outdated notions of male independence. To prove their manhood, they engage in battles for domination over one another and women, whom they secretly crave. Both of these forms of combat are clearly sex-

ual. Medoff's men uphold their claim to domination over women through guns and sexual violence, and they end their disputes between each other in thinly disguised homosexual encounters. Temporarily at least, Medoff's New Westerners affirm what William T. Pilkington and Don Graham name "old values in a barren time" (4).

Nevertheless, the hero plays expose the self-reliant cowboy as an anachronism. While Medoff borrows from the traditional popular Western formula, he rewrites the ending. The adolescent good guys, who, in Philip French's summary of the formula, always respect women but also resent them for luring them away "from the more comforting company of men" (66), grow up. They learn to love somebody other than their mythic saddle-pals, whom they leave for real women. The bad guys, who combine a "positive commitment to destruction" with "lecherous designs on women" (48), also change. They leave the stage either reborn or defeated.

The "Red Ryder" trilogy best exemplifies the concerns of the hero plays. In *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, a brutal Vietnam veteran derives pleasure from abusing helpless women and crushing Stephen's image of himself as Red Ryder. Then, in *The Heart Outright*, having followed his torturer's path to Vietnam, a matured Stephen returns to New Mexico in order to resolve his love-hate relationship with his female former colleague. Medoff completes Stephen's coming of age in *Stumps*. A family man living in Texas, the would-be cowboy finally accepts his responsibilities not only to himself and friends but also to his wife and children.

The immense success of *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* changed Medoff's life. The first of his plays to be produced in New York, *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* opened at the Circle Repertory Theatre in June 1973, then moved to Off-Broadway and ran at the Eastside Playhouse for 228 performances. This haunting play about a holdup in smalltown New Mexico earned Medoff a

Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwrighting, the Obie Award for Distinguished Playwrighting, the Drama Desk Award, and the Outer Critics' Award for the 1973-1974 season. In "Home Movie," Medoff describes his sudden rise to fame: "I am offered films to write; radio and television programs to sit on; pieces of paper to write my name on; people wait expectantly to hear what I have to say, as if because I can write I can also speak. Heady stuff" (40-41).

Critics' reactions to the Off-Broadway production of *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* were mixed. Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* wrote a rave review prophetically entitled, "The Stage: 'Red Ryder' Aims to Stay." Medoff's drama, he says, paints a "chilling picture of a lonely, lost America, disaffected and disjointed" (7 Dec. 1973: 31:1). Two weeks later, however, Barnes' colleague Walter Kerr expressed puzzlement about Teddy's motivations for his violent holdup. In "The Man Who Came to the Diner," he writes of Teddy, "His behavior doesn't explain him and it doesn't reveal much about his captives' psyches, either" (*The New York Times*, 23 Dec. 1973: 5:4).

And yet, like all of Medoff's hero plays, *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* does reveal a great deal about America's collective psyche after Vietnam. Medoff shows the demystification of the male mystique in a drama that introduces the elements of his hero plays: a sexually innocent good guy faces a chauvinistic bad guy in a homoerotic showdown involving marginal women and imaginary saddle pals. The audience realizes the Old West is finally dead when the bad man Teddy thwarts Stephen's attempts to transform himself into his cowboy hero, Red Ryder. Red Ryder will never come back.

Teddy's oppressive, therapeutic presence in a secluded New Mexico diner invokes the holdup play tradition of Robert E. Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1935). Teddy, like Sherwood's out-

law Duke Mantee, holds a number of people hostage and confronts them with unpleasant realities, thereby forcing everybody to change his life in tandem with a changing American West. Other holdup plays fusing personal and regional change include William Inge's *Bus Stop* (1955), Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* (1982), and Marsha Norman's *The Hold-Up* (1983).

Most of the changes in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* concern the protagonists' masculinity, femininity, or lack thereof. A virgin at nineteen, the adolescent Stephen Ryder, alias "Red" Ryder, has yet to find his place in the changing West. Doomed to work the diner's "graveyard shift" on Sunday mornings, he is evidently stuck. Though he has long dreamed of "gettin the hell outta this lousy little town," he stays on at the diner even after his shift ends. While waiting for his stepfather to pick him up to go to church, he indulges in teenage fantasies, reading the paper and *Playboy* magazine. He also likes to tease Angel Childress, the chubby waitress who adores him. Her own insecurity prohibits her from expressing her feelings openly, as Stephen well knows.

Both she and Stephen face the problem of growing up in a time when old and new gender roles clash. Stephen shirks this problem by living in the past, since "then's when counts." His inexperience notwithstanding, Stephen strikes his masculine pose and upholds his pretensions to be an Old West hero. With his open sportshirt, rolled-up sleeves, and a tattoo that reads "Born Dead," he looks like a rock'n'roll star from the 1950s. Yet he identifies himself with Red Ryder, a tough Hollywood cowboy from the 1930s and 1940s and hero of a popular Western newspaper comic. In the B-Western entitled *The Red Ryder*, a sheriff named Red Ryder loses his job because he refuses to believe his buddy committed a murder. In order to save his falsely accused friend, Red Ryder risks his life until he triumphs over the villains' vicious schemes.

Angel is not only as sexually inexperienced as Stephen, but as

invisible, domestic, and passive as the stereotypical Western woman. Although two years Stephen's senior, Angel also still depends on her parents. She waits for a "legal separation" from her mother, and she wears on her ring finger a wedding band given to her by her father. She spends her days working and watching television with Lyle Striker, the owner of the motel and gas station across the street. Lyle is a New Westerner, "impotent" as Stephen, as suggested by his leg brace and his crutch. He unsuccessfully courts Angel while watching *Bonanza* on Sunday nights.

Living a life determined by Hollywood's and their own fantasies, all the characters at the diner need the Western bad man Teddy to serve as a catalyst in redirecting their lives. The mean, action-oriented Teddy is the very opposite of the shy, adolescent Stephen, whose dreams harm nobody. Though he looks like a hippie, Teddy perverts the "Love and Peace" ideology of the counterculture. This drug-trafficking Vietnam veteran chooses random violence to express his disillusionment with the New West. As he says, Teddy embodies the "disaffected youth of the United States of America" in the 1960s. (The theme of the traumatized Vietnam vet who finds it hard to adjust is also evident in Medoff's one-act play, *The Froegle Dictum* [1971]. A "stump" shattered in mind and body, Al sees his purpose in life as attempting suicide and sleeping indiscriminately with women.) One of Teddy's partners echoes Teddy's words in stating, "He pretty well got his finger on the pulse of our generation."

Teddy's use of verbal and physical violence as well as his sexual abuse of women all violate the "Western code" Stephen lives by. Teddy calls Lyle a "nice old cripple" and ridicules him for ogling the breasts of his bra-less travel companion, Cheryl. He then "honks" one of Angel's breasts and tells her that she is doomed to spinsterhood because of her "bulk." He also harasses a couple, the Ethridges, eating at the diner. He starts by calling Richard

Ethridge a wimp and parasite, then kicks and shoots him. Moreover, by threatening to smash Clarisse Ethridge's \$11,000 violin, he forces her to kiss him and expose her breasts.

The final shootout takes place between the two would-be cowboys, Teddy and Stephen. The outlaw directs his own version of *The Red Ryder*, thereby destroying Stephen's image of himself as Red Ryder and exposing him as a virgin. Teddy claims that "Red" chooses to "ride the range" with a saddle pal only because he fears women and "ain't never had one." In order to force Stephen to prove that he is not homosexual, Teddy then asks him to kiss and make love to Angel:

Okay now ride up to the counter and dismount and tie your horse up. Bad. Very bad. Okay, now, ya go into this here cafe here, see, and sweet cheeks is your only beloved—cause you're Red Ryder and you only got one truly beloved. I mean, as far as I can see, you just don't mess around on the side. But, unlike the homosexual fruit Lone Ranger, you do got yourself this one fine gal here. A great time it was, Jim, when we didn't know enough to wonder at all those vir-ile lads runnin around in weird couples. It's no wonder our generation despises women. (89)

But Stephen tries to prove that he is his own man. He despises his captor rather than women and rewrites the script by suddenly attacking Teddy with a knife.

Ironically, Stephen grows up and frees himself from his dependency on his mythic hero, Red Ryder, by first proving Teddy right. His sudden attack with the knife suggests a homosexual encounter between the two equally inept men. The play ends with Stephen doing exactly what his cowboy hero always did. He leaves town, as does Teddy. Cheryl and Angel also follow the traditional Western script and stay, left behind by the men they love.

The play's conventional "Old Western" ending may have induced

Medoff to write a sequel to *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*. In *The Heart Outright*, co-produced by the American Southwest Theatre Company and the New Mexico Repertory Theatre in October 1986, Medoff returns to Stephen and Angel ten years after the holdup that changed their lives. Both characters have matured, Medoff notes in his conversation with Johnson. Stephen in particular "has grown into a very interesting man who out of his own torment has realized that he has to reach out to other people" (56). In this case he reaches out to Angel, whom he used to mistreat. Though in many ways a mirror image of *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, *The Heart Outright* eschews male solitariness and misogyny.

Back in New Mexico after following his tormentor to Vietnam, Stephen experiences a "holdup" of a different sort. The bus to his current hometown, Austin, is not due for at least another hour. So he is stuck at the bus station with its "child-like" night manager, Dick Turpin. Dick not only recalls Stephen from ten years ago, but he sees in the veteran what Stephen originally saw in Teddy—a hero. Dick similarly abandons his immature hero worship after finding himself in an attack scene. So does Angel, who learns the truth about her "cowboy" hero.

The Heart Outright begins with a monologue by Stephen, in which he muses about men's eroding masculinity and their damaging attempts to be macho. Though part-owner and manager of a pornographic movie theater in Austin, Stephen resents the sexist attitudes inherent in movies which reduce women to sexual objects. Likewise, Stephen rejects American heroics in Vietnam as inadequate to revivify the heroic tradition. The Vietnam experience has degraded rather than resurrected men. His former captor, Teddy, for instance, senselessly killed innocent farmers and their wives and kids. By contrast, Stephen mutilated himself by blowing off his hand, an experience as traumatic for him as the

holdup.

Stephen comes home changed, cured of any Old Western aspirations of heroism or a false sense of masculinity. He completes his mission by shattering Dick's misconceptions. To Dick, Stephen was the "only hero this stinkin little sinkhole's ever had" because he "went to Vietnam and moved to another city." For ten years now, Dick has saved the newspaper article about Stephen's courageous rescue mission, which reads, "Young Ryder attempted to free the others at one point by rushing Franklin with a paring knife, nearly losing his own life for his heroics." Dick learns, through challenging his former "Hollywood hero" to a fight, that Stephen, like himself, is "jist some guy tryin to make his way."

The more significant fight in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* and *The Heart Outright*—the battle of the sexes—also ends after ten years. For that to happen, Stephen must first destroy Angel's image of him as Red Ryder. Angel harbors the same misconceptions about Stephen as Dick does. But once she snaps out of her fantasy world, a new understanding between the ex-coworkers becomes possible. As manipulated by false media presentations as are Dick and Stephen, Angel romanticizes Stephen's Vietnam episode as being filled with Hollywood Western stunts. She calls her returning hero "cowboy" and addresses him as "Staff Sgt. Stephen Ryder, huh—jist like in them John Wayne films." Still, Angel abhors the Hollywood macho image as much as Stephen does. The image of Teddy sticking a gun in Stephen's mouth has haunted her dreams, just as Stephen has had nightmares about Vietnam.

Because both Stephen and Angel have freed themselves of gender stereotypes and outworn notions of heroism, they can finally communicate. In defiance of the Western script, Red Ryder has even married a widowed Vietnamese woman with two babies. And ten years after the fact, he finally reaches out to Angel, whom he used

to reject because of her obesity. Not far from where they worked together ten years ago, they will celebrate their new understanding sexually, to the sound of a Country and Western ballad from the juke box. Physically Stephen and Angel find themselves in the same sleepy Western town, but spiritually they have moved on to a different West.

Medoff concludes the "Red Ryder" trilogy in style with *Stumps*, which opened in Las Cruces in October 1989. Another co-production by the American Southwest Theatre Company and the New Mexico Repertory Theatre, *Stumps* summarizes the two earlier dramas. As in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, "Red" Ryder and Jerry Marcus, a fellow "gunslinger" from Vietnam, intend to show the world that they are real men rather than a "coupla pretentious stumps." The "sidekicks" again face a brutal bad man whose obsessive machismo first intrigues but then disgusts them. In a relapse to male chauvinist ideals, Stephen and Jerry hope to make exactly the kind of sexist movie that Stephen pretends to abhor in *The Heart Outright*. In the end, they enact in reality what they had planned to do in their pornographic film: celebrate rather than degrade women. Stephen accepts his responsibility as a husband and father, while Jerry learns to love Emily rather than merely lust after her.

The setting in *Stumps* has a symbolic value similar to that of the diner and the bus station in the earlier plays. *Stumps* takes place in the Ryders' home, a small isolated trailer on the river outside Austin, Texas. A fusion of stasis and motion, the trailer indicates personal and regional change. Stephen still dreams of bygone eras in which male bonding and misogyny prevent men from accepting the responsibilities of family life. Thus, it is Lin, Stephen's wife, who has to remind her straying husband of the pastoral dream they once shared of building a "little house right to the west": "We can't lose this land. Have you forgotten how long when you were

in the hospital we dreamed of a piece of land by a river where my children and I could live in peace with you, a family?" By proposing to shoot the pornographic movie at home, Stephen threatens the family idyll. He desecrates the land as much as the satanic Reverend Calvin Rhodes, who turns the hill country into a bloody battlefield.

Stephen and Jerry, who are both crippled Vietnam veterans, cling to archaic ideals of masculinity and heroism. Stephen wears a prosthetic hand; and Jerry, who is paralyzed from the waist down, sits in a wheelchair. The opening scene reinforces the suggestion of their impotence. Both men help Lin prepare snacks for Rhodes, the sponsor of their pornographic movie, and Emily, the female lead. Jerry slices zucchini, a foreshadowing of the ensuing slaughters and the cripples' apparent emasculation. Their collaboration on Jerry's script exposes their sexist attitudes, which they confirm through their behavior toward the women in the play. Both desire sex with Emily more than her participation in the project. Stephen attempts to seduce her right in front of his wife, and Jerry proposes to rehearse with her one of the numerous scenes in which they make love. While Stephen antagonizes Lin by cheating on her, Jerry hates her because she is Vietnamese. He describes to her his slicing of zucchini as "fileting a Vietnamese schlong."

Rhodes, like Teddy in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, terrorizes men and women. Nancy Gage says that the irreverent reverend is Medoff's most "verbally adroit and cunning villain" since Teddy (*Albuquerque Journal*, 23 Feb. 1990: C9). He took the sexy but dim child-woman Emily from the street to make her into a porn star. Since then, he has treated her like his property, silencing her on and off the screen because she is allegedly "more adept at physicalizing her emotions than she is at vocalizing them." Upon entering the house, Rhodes offends his hosts by coming on to Lin since he is convinced that she finds him as "perversely attrac-

tive" as he finds her. Finally, Rhodes seeks to play his partners off against each other because Jerry insists upon starring in and directing his movie. When they resist him, Rhodes ends the first act by punching Emily in the stomach and dragging her off.

Rhodes' increasingly maniacal terror brings about his downfall and his partners' conversion. Returning alone from a screening of Emily's first porn movie, Rhodes attacks and rapes Lin. He then takes on Jerry, who wonders about Emily's bruises and the necessity of displaying her breasts at the screening. Challenged by his handicapped opponent to "fight like a man," Rhodes knocks Jerry over in his wheelchair. He finally forces Emily to undress, a humiliation which Stephen stops. The brutal climax comes when Rhodes, abandoned by his partners, beats Emily and leaves her bloodied near the trailer. When Rhodes comes back to claim her, Jerry and Stephen threaten the villain with a gun, yet they refrain from killing him. Medoff explains why in his interview with Erben: "They don't stoop to the lowest level of the old West, of taking law totally into their own hands" (7).

In contrast to *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* and *The Heart Outright*, plays in which men revise myths of the popular West, in *Stumps* it is a woman who rewrites what Rhodes ridicules as an "old cowboy movie." Taking the gun, Lin reveals that Rhodes "touched" her, then kisses him and bites his tongue off. In doing that, she closely follows a scene from Jerry's script, in which the male hero says, "Mouths are where the power is. A man can have no feeling in most of his body and life, but if he's got a mouth and a tongue, he's got power." Together, then, the characters silence the archetypal Western villain, and together they will live from now on. The happy ending of *Stumps* simultaneously goes beyond and confirms gender stereotypes. Lin forgives and embraces Stephen, while Jerry saves the whore with a heart of gold by promising to take care of her.

Firekeeper (1978), an earlier play, has for its hero another Anglo

priest. Religion, like myth, gives people something to believe in, a value system to live by—or at least it did in the past. Father Pascal in *Firekeeper*, like Rhodes, not only feeds on but also perverts religion and the Western myth in the twentieth century. Unlike Rhodes, however, Pascal repents and recommits himself to his ideals. As Medoff tells Johnson, Pascal “is going to reaffirm a moral imperative for himself, and it’s not going to have anything to do with Catholicism. It’s going to have to do with trying to serve other people’s needs” (53). Medoff reinterprets the Indian symbolism of the firekeeper, whom Mark Busby defines as the one determining the “right path for men to follow” (1239). Pascal is heroic because he does at least find the right path for himself to follow: he will take care of the woman he abused.

Firekeeper is Medoff’s second play produced at the Dallas Theater Center, the first being *Doing a Good One for the Red Man*. It premiered at the Kalita Humphreys Theatre in May 1978, but achieved no popular success. William Albright offers one explanation: “Its confusing jumble of cultures and symbols make it less direct, easy to follow or just plausible than those earlier plays” (35). Similar reviews and a modest run may have convinced Medoff not to revise his drama about the three cultures in the Southwest. He explains:

There’s certain aspects of Hispanic culture that I don’t understand, certainly Indian culture, and until I have a real intimacy with those cultures, I’m not likely to write about them. One of the reasons why I haven’t gone back and finished *Firekeeper* is that I felt a little bit like an intruder into the Latin and Indian cultures. (Erben 7)

Still, *Firekeeper* is an important work, not only because of its multiculturalism, but also because it introduces the disability metaphor later developed in *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Hands of Its Enemy* (1984). Also, for *Firekeeper* Medoff chose a remote New

Mexico setting during the Depression, and that choice shows his unabated concern with mythic change. Like such famous Depression dramas as Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* (1935) or John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Firekeeper* portrays the West at a crossroads in troubled times.

In the play, two equally incompetent Westerners vie for the position of the "firekeeper." Both disqualify themselves through their insensitive and abusive treatment of helpless women. Father Pascal, the representative of the Church, lusts for the mentally disturbed Hispanic girl, Antonia, all the while pretending to cure her. His opponent, the rancher and county sheriff Angus Childress, fathered her by raping her mother. In the end, both redeem themselves, profess a willingness to change, and even cooperate. Childress assumes responsibility for his action and Pascal resigns from the priesthood in order to live with Antonia. Both men abandon their macho images.

Pascal is at once the play's protagonist, narrator, and New Western "hero." His rather loose commitment to celibacy merely disguises his insecurity and general fear of women. In that, Pascal recalls Medoff's Hollywood cowboys. He comes from Hollywood, and he loves the Western "movies of Tom Mix, of Buck Jones and William S. Hart." He even owes his second identity as Jason Cutcher to a character in the movie *Trail Dust*. Pascal has yet to find an identity in the New West. He identifies himself with Hollywood cowboys but wears a Buster Keaton hat. And he vacillates between the comic hero and the "savior" Jesus Christ, with whom he shares little except his initials. On the one hand, Pascal is the "perfect priest and the perfect comic," and on the other, he is the nostalgic hero, whom Pilkington and Graham call a "comic survivor" (4).

Pascal's opponent, the rancher and civil power figure Childress, by embodying both the law and the outlaw, foreshadows Billy S.

Hart Finley in *The Majestic Kid*. He shares his inclination to physical violence and his habit of enforcing the law with the gun. Childress even ignores Pascal's request to hand over his revolver in Pascal's "sanctuary," the church. Like Pascal, Childress once attended a Catholic seminary. After two months, though, he "lit off in search a dreams a the wild west."

Despite their power struggles, Childress and Pascal unite in their contempt for women. A quasi-feudal ruler in the democratic West, Childress reserves the right to extend his ownership of the ranch to all those working on it, women in particular. Thus, he has impregnated the Hispanic worker Feliciano Noche, but never married her because "you don't marry what you own; you use it." Instead, he has matched her up with the foreman of his ranch, Eulogio Noche. As part of their arrangement, Childress and Eulogio have divided up the girls in town between them according to race. The half-Mexican, half-Black Eulogio has to "stick with the brown gals," so Childress can "take care a the white ones."

Pascal's "therapeutic" sessions with Antonia reveal his and Childress's transgressions as well as Eulogio's incest with his mentally retarded daughter. Since his teenage days, Pascal has indulged in sexual fantasies, which now Antonia arouses again by putting his hand between her legs. Pascal's initiation, however, depends upon his unequivocal acceptance of the "young woman who neither reads nor writes." Just like Stephen Ryder, the would-be Hollywood cowboy will have to accept Antonia as a partner and friend. Pascal has yet to "learn humility," the reason why the Catholic church sent him to the remote southern New Mexico community in the first place. The same need for humility is true of the "legend" Childress. Finally, both Westerners live up to their roles as the "great men" in Antonia's life, whereas Eulogio meets his just punishment as part of the play's bloody finale.

Both Antonia's parents and her guardian and grandfather have

to die so Pascal and Childress can redeem themselves. Feliciano kills Eulogio for violating their daughter, then dies at the hand of her illegitimate father, who finally turns the gun on himself. Thereupon, Childress proves his conversion by vowing to take care of his handicapped child, while Pascal renounces his ill-fated priesthood altogether in order to be with Antonia. In the final scene, Pascal burns his Buster Keaton hat, thereby symbolically renouncing and reaffirming his role as the firekeeper, the man "capable of solving the enigmas and agonies of this life."

Another play about mythic change in the West, *The Majestic Kid* is a major work that had its debut in Las Cruces in March 1981 and that subsequently has been produced nationwide. Like the "Red Ryder" saga, *The Majestic Kid* contains all the ingredients of the hero plays. A young Eastern idealist moves to the West in order to affirm his childhood visions of himself as the "Majestic Kid," another Hollywood cowboy. Instead, the "kid" grows up as a result of iconoclastic showdowns involving him, his imaginary saddle pal, and a chauvinistic, contemporary bad man. But most important, the young man's rite of passage requires him to reconsider his outdated concept of masculinity. Once he does, he can enter into a meaningful relationship with the opposite sex.

Critics have pointed out the link between the hero's individual growth in *The Majestic Kid* and a concomitant regional growth. Bernard Weiner, in his review "The Majestic Kid' Wins the West," attributes Aaron Weiss's maturation to his confrontation with the "political and social realities of a corrupt and fast-changing world" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 17 Oct. 1985: 66). Expecting easy answers to complex questions, Americans like to close their eyes to problems that cannot be solved in sixty minutes. Medoff draws the connection between the Hollywood cowboy in the play and the one who became president at the time when he wrote *The Majestic Kid*. Marilyn Stasio quotes Medoff in *The New York Times*, "Here

was this old cowboy hero from my childhood who had become President of the United States in the decidedly unheroic age. I began to dwell on how much easier it was to save the mythical Old West than it was going to be for him to save the real world" (27 Nov. 1988: H7).

As the critics have noted, Medoff intertwines personal and societal changes in the West in *The Majestic Kid*. Aaron Weiss, the crusading young lawyer from Chicago, and William S. Hart Finley, who is his rancher opponent and a judge, fight on a personal and professional level. Their professional conflict revolves around the use of Western land. Whereas Judge "Billy" buys up land or simply seizes it in order to convert it into a toxic waste dump, Aaron would return it to its rightful owner, the Apaches. His idealism suffers a heavy blow when he learns that the Apaches plan to secure the land for commercial purposes as well—they intend to build a resort hotel and spa on the land.

Aaron and Billy recapitulate the classic Western struggle between good and bad guys. Billy's Eastern connections and his collaboration with "folks in positions of power" expose him as the proverbial Western bad man. In that, he differs from the famous cowboy film star William S. Hart, whom he brings to mind. Billy not only represents the "laws in these parts," but he enforces them with his handgun, which he wears in court. Aaron, by contrast, continues the tradition of popular culture Western heroes such as Red Ryder or Laredo Kid. Hoping to "restore the original spirit of this nation," Aaron still emulates the Laredo Kid, his childhood hero and "Keeper of the American Spirit."

The most significant social change for the contemporary Western male, however, is his increasing dependency on women rather than his buddies or himself. Medoff says in "Adios, Old West" that Aaron desires to "learn to deal with women as they want to be dealt with" (8). Aaron and Billy vie for Lisa Belmondo's love,

though for different reasons. Billy is less interested in her than in her land. Like Teddy and Rhodes in the "Red Ryder" plays, Billy humiliates women, whom he sees as mere sex objects. Thus, he asks out Lisa with the proposition, "I'm gonna bury my brownie in your fudge sauce tonight." Aaron, by contrast, fears women, as did his Old Western role models. Nevertheless, like Stephen, he plays the "cool macho big city boy" when Lisa first seduces him. When she repeatedly protects him against Billy, Aaron finally admits his lack of masculinity: "I'm not a man. I'm just an aging boy adapting badly to a world run amok."

Aaron's coming of age hinges on his acceptance of a new concept of masculinity, a concept more in tune with societal changes in the West. First he has to learn that solitariness and self-reliance belong to the Western past, not the present. He finds out for himself that, contrary to what his buddy Laredo tells him, women may sometimes rescue men, both literally and figuratively. Nevertheless, Aaron continues to listen to Laredo, who commands him, "You cain't be sharin yoreself with some gal. Lord, son, yore the Majestic Kid! That's whut the hero's got his saddlepal fer." Aaron believes him and temporarily breaks up with Lisa, only to realize that being with a woman can be as enjoyable as leaving her.

Aaron completes his initiation by learning that women "don't see men as heroes anymore," at least not the way he and Laredo do. Women would change the Western movie formula to one in which men face rather than flee the challenges of life in the New West. Truly heroic men would acknowledge women as equals, as Lisa explains to Aaron:

That way they won't have to get married, ya see. Because of course ya couldn't have the woman in distress in the next movie saved by the man who married the woman in distress in the last movie. So this guy just sings his way badly from movie to movie, rescuing towns fulla weak sops and leaving

behind a trail of drooling but undefiled beauties. If ya ask me, what would be a tad more useful today would be: They get married and have children, and you have a series of movies about a family facing the challenges of ranch life together. (210-11)

In the end, Aaron will accept the responsibility inherent in true masculinity. He will grow up, have a family and children, and "share the challenges of ranch life" with Lisa.

But first he meets both Laredo and Billy in ritualistic show-downs and confronts them with their male inferiority. In the first face-off, Billy uses Lisa one last time, namely as a shield. Yet Aaron prevails by wresting the revolver from Billy's hand. Aaron then confronts Laredo with the fact that he and his buddies have preferred male-male and male-horse relationships mainly because they were afraid of women. As a result, they created "a hundred and nine scripts with the same plot." The script of *The Majestic Kid* ends differently. Aaron beats Laredo to the draw for the first time. Since the matured Aaron evidently needs him no more, Laredo shares Red Ryder's fate. Neither will come back, so Laredo asks, "Which way's that sunset?" Laredo, according to Medoff in "Adios, Old West," understands "that he has helped make a better, a stronger, a worthier, a more complete man, if not the man he thought he was intended to make" (13). He has helped make a new Western hero.

THE HEROINE PLAYS

Medoff's heroine plays explore changing views of the heroic West from a female perspective. Rather than macho men and majestic kids, Medoff's heroine plays contrast Old Western "gals" and New Western women. Like his men, Medoff's women eventually free themselves from stereotypical gender roles. Women in the West,

according to Elizabeth Jameson, have been portrayed either as "helpmates" or "civilizers" (145). They relied on men rather than themselves in a region that Susan Armitage calls "Hisland" (9). As they attempt to find their identity independent of men, Medoff's heroines face assaults by chauvinistic Westerners.

Medoff's heroine plays reflect the same concerns as the hero plays. Both women and men take full responsibility for their lives in the New West of gender equality. Once they do, they facilitate a new understanding between the sexes. In showing women's liberation in a male-dominated society, the heroine plays closely follow the formula of the feminist drama, a genre that Gerald Weales explains. He says that women in feminist plays fight against preconceived role models and male oppressors who will not let them be themselves. Finally, they overcome all male resistance, discover themselves, and create their "own place in the world" (596).

The Wager, Medoff's first play and his second produced off-Broadway, introduces the New Western heroine at a time when Medoff was still primarily concerned with heroism and masculinity. He refers to Honor Stevens, the heroine in *The Wager*, as an early example of the new woman who "stands up for herself and stands up to those three men" harassing her (Erben 6). Blending gunplay and verbal games, physical and emotional violence, *The Wager* added to Medoff's reputation already established with *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* *The Wager* opened at the HB Playwrights Foundation Theatre in January 1973, then—like Medoff's earlier play—moved to the East Side Playhouse, where it ran for more than 100 performances. Critics liked or disliked *The Wager* for the same reasons as *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* Jack Kroll admires Medoff's "natural gift for comedy, an instinct for surprise, a gift for language and a love-hate for his society that makes him representative of a generation" (*Newsweek* 4 Nov. 1974: 63). Other reviewers criticized the drama's strong emphasis on

verbal effects.

Like the hero plays, *The Wager* is rooted in the heroic myth. Showing Honor's liberation from male repression, *The Wager* depicts the Western shift from exclusively masculine to pluralistic territory. Three inept men seek to dominate Honor, but she proves herself superior to them by divorcing the first, ending a fling with the second after their first sexual encounter, and seducing the virginal third. They all find it hard to adjust to the contemporary West of changing gender roles and relationships.

As do the men in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, those in *The Wager* embody various aspects of the heroic tradition. Yet they unite in their obsession with their fading virility in, not accidentally, an academic environment in the New West. The California campus where they live and work has crippled them physically. So the protagonists, graduate students Leeds and Ward, propose a wager to prove their manhood. Leeds explains the rules:

The wager is double or nothing on the five hundred. The structure of the competition is this: We are both betting that you can seduce Honor Stevens. However, if within forty-eight hours after you've first been to bed with her, her husband makes an attempt on your life or kills you, you lose. If he makes an attempt on your life or kills you after forty-eight hours, you win. Are you game? (10)

The wager, by inviting physical and sexual violence, recalls the lawless Old West, where guns validated conquest.

Like Stephen in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?*, Leeds romanticizes that time. A graduate student in English whose physicality is reduced to "verbal gymnastics," Leeds hides a "dangerous explosiveness" under his outward carelessness. In addition, he wears a revolver, and he has few scruples about using it. At one point, he shoots one of Ward's pictures on the wall and threatens

his friend, "You either bet, pay up, or I'm going to murder you." Leeds further resembles Stephen in his sexual inexperience and paranoia. He too is a virgin who reads *Playboy* magazine, and he has feared women ever since, at the age of twelve, he shook hands with a girl.

Ward, in turn, recalls Teddy, both in his degradation of women and in his preoccupation with his masculinity. A physical education student, he walks on the stage wearing a bathing suit, "which displays his body and sexual apparatus to best advantage." He passes his time either swimming laps in the pool, dribbling his basketball, or throwing darts in the apartment, which he shares with Leeds. His favorite sport, however, is "scoring" in bed. Ward, the "Lone Ranger of Sex," has set his sight on Honor because her "number's come up," but nevertheless he needs the wager as an additional "incentive."

The plot of *The Wager* revolves around several seduction scenes, each one adding to Honor's liberation. Although Ward gets his way with Honor within the first hour of the wager, he is surprised to see her in "complete control" during their lovemaking. Since she merely seemed to be "playing him for a fool," the confused Ward later suggests to Leeds that they double the wager, because he claims he would feel "bored" unless he got the chance to make love to her again within the next forty-seven hours. Honor, in the meantime, has lost any interest in Ward mainly because he failed to satisfy her sexually.

It turns out that Honor was the one who "used" Ward as the tool to end her relationship with her husband Ron. The too intellectual professor of microbiology has also proven himself sexually inadequate for her, so she has decided to divorce him. The sole reason for not yet having done so is his strong tendency to "radical behavior." If, then, neither Ron nor Ward (who expects to be going to Tijuana with her) has a place in Honor's new life, Leeds does. At

least he does for now. Since she frightens him so much that he dreads meeting her "unarmed," Honor knows that she will enjoy sexually initiating the "little boy" who initiated the sexual assault on her.

Before this happens, however, the unheroic Westerners again make fools of themselves by staging an Old West shootout, at which they also fail. Having singled out Leeds as responsible for the wager and his failing marriage, the distressed Ron threatens to kill him with a submachine gun. Yet as a cowboy and marksman, Ron proves himself to be as impotent as Leeds, who pulls out his own gun, which is unloaded. Ron finally exits to shoot at least his car, yet "misfires" and ends up washing it. The absurdity of the scene demonstrates once again the men's helplessness in coping with shifting gender roles in the West.

So does their final, equally futile attempt to force a last sexual encounter with Honor the night before she leaves for Tijuana to get her divorce. Honor, of course, sleeps with no one that night, and she will fly to Tijuana without Ward the next day. But she will first win another wager with Leeds, one which will require them to meet "unarmed." Arms, as well as their carriers, are icons of the West's frontier past.

The Halloween Bandit, first produced in 1976, ends with a similar message. Grace Rice, the flamboyant and seemingly independent TV star, meets even more male resistance to her self-realization than did Honor in *The Wager*. A disguised, "armed" bandit breaks into her apartment in order to rape her on Halloween night. Since the rapist's identity remains open until the second act, the question of who assaults the victim is as crucial to *The Halloween Bandit* as it is to *The Wager*. In both cases Medoff suggests the answer is that the assailant is the entire male sex. Because the bandit in *The Halloween Bandit* wears various masks and changes his identity repeatedly during the assault, he be-

comes a generic character, embodying men's schizophrenic views of themselves and women. The play's heroine likewise represents her gender. Feminine and successful, she invites both valorization and violation.

The Halloween Bandit is one of several Medoff dramas in which the heroine is a media personality of "mythic" status. Grace, like Emily in *Stumps* and Lucy Samuels in *The Homage that Follows* (1987), falls prey to mass-mediated dreams of stardom and femininity. Like his misguided men who emulate Western cowboys, Medoff's star-struck women lose control of their lives. They also worship false idols of little or no significance to the real West. As role models, the glamorous Hollywood starlets are as antiquated as Red Ryder or Laredo Kid.

Critics have shown the parallels between *The Halloween Bandit* and the off-Broadway plays *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* and *The Wager*. Medoff himself refers to his fourth full-length drama as his earlier plays "done more angrily" (Johnson 51). Mel Gussow of *The New York Times* calls *The Halloween Bandit* "a comedy of menace" due to the gradual eruption of violence in an otherwise placid situation (19 Dec. 1978: C9). Another parallel is the drama's "Westernness" despite a non-Western setting. As in his two hit dramas, Medoff links the gun, the phallus, and male violation of the female.

The symbolism of the "Halloween bandit" reinforces the notion of Western lawlessness and redemption. Hector, the Halloween Bandit, will suffer defeat in the end, but as a relic from the Western past, he has been "defeated" all along. Like Medoff's other "outlaws," though, Hector does triumph temporarily. At first, the "rapist, thief, murderer" successfully disguises his insecurities by using physical violence to abuse Grace, the glamorous model. After breaking into her apartment, he clips the telephone cord, threatens her with his knife, forces her to undress, hits, and finally

rapes her.

In his disguise, Hector combines the traits of all confused Medoff protagonists. He is at once the emasculated chauvinist and the immature adolescent, as he successively identifies himself as Grace's two former lovers, Arnold and Robert. Both continue to haunt Grace, for she used them as models for her televised puppet show and presently writes them as characters into a book. Symbolically, Grace reduces men to "puppets" who have served to further her career.

In the past, both men have tried to impose themselves on her; in the present, they do it again in the form of the Halloween bandit. Since they have proven unable to "save" themselves, Grace, like Honor in *The Wager*, cannot and will not assume the role of their savior. She "dumped" her high school sweetheart Arnold, who later commits suicide when he learns that his best friend Robert had sex with his woman. Robert's interests in Grace were and are only physical; he has come back only because his present life is in shambles. He went through a divorce and, as cosmetic surgeon, abhors "overhauling" people's bodies.

Grace's career, by contrast, seems almost flawless. As the "American dream girl" who was on the cover of *Newsweek*, she is a "mythical character" like the Halloween bandit. She met the rich and famous, modeled beauty products, and starred in commercials and her own television show. At present, she is attending college, writing a book, and about to get married. She has, however, unwillingly undertaken these recent career changes. Approaching middle age, she finds it increasingly hard to find employment, although she is still "glorious looking." In order to acquire her fame, she had to pay a high price, too. She overhauled her body only to end up the object of male sadistic fantasies. She went to bed with her producers, for whom she was the puppet. When they finally "canned" her, she turned to alcohol and contemplated suicide.

Grace's stereotypical characterization enables Medoff to call at-

tention to the thin line between female valorization and devalorization. The supposed dream girl's life has been as fragmented as her lovers', as documented by a series of pictures in her apartment recording her history of physical abuse. Furthermore, the photos foreshadow the climax of *The Halloween Bandit* because they cause Robert's assault on her. Recalling the (homo)sexual encounters in the hero plays, the rape does help Grace to exorcise her former lover from her memory. Unable to save him, she sends him away: "I can only forgive myself my own errors and stupidities and try to save myself." Men and women will not find one another until they find themselves.

They do find one another and themselves in *Children of a Lesser God*, which established Medoff's national and international reputation. After an incredible Broadway run of about 700 performances, this immensely successful play about the stormy love relationship between a deaf young woman and her speech therapist has been translated into more than a dozen languages. Moreover, *Children of a Lesser God* won the Tony Award and the Drama Desk Award, as well as the New York Outer Critics' Circle Award for the best play of the 1979-1980 season. Finally, the movie version earned Medoff a nomination for the best adapted screenplay and Marlee Matlin an Academy Award in 1987.

Though not a Western drama, *Children of a Lesser God* had a Western beginning. Directed by Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God* had its first workshop production in Las Cruces in April 1979. From October to December 1979, the drama played at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles before its New York opening at the Longacre Theatre in March 1980. Medoff's Broadway hit is also important in a Western context because it reveals the author's growing interest in heroines rather than heroes. In his "Not so Random Notes from the Playwright," Medoff recalls the genesis of *Children of a Lesser God*. Having planned it as a work for Phyllis

French, a founder of the National Theater of the Deaf, Medoff soon found himself "focussing on the male protagonist and surrounding him with functional females" (xi). It took him several weeks and rewrites until he managed to write the play that he had in mind. He states, "Sarah is becoming stronger, more equal to James. Now when I rewrite I find myself (finally) automatically seeing the play from her point of view" (xv).

Critics almost uniformly liked *Children of a Lesser God* as well as its central metaphor. According to Edwin Wilson, Sarah's deafness is a "powerful" symbol of "the difficulties a man and a woman have in communicating with each other" (*The Wall Street Journal* 1 Apr. 1980: 22). In *The New Republic*, Robert Brustein interprets *Children of a Lesser God* as a work within the distinct genre of the disability play, which has the following ingredients. A non-understanding "normal" character attempts to cure the "unforgettable" handicapped protagonist. Nevertheless, the hero and the heroine fall in love in what appears to be a "terrific breakthrough" for the handicapped. Yet their relationship remains ill-fated until the "normal" person and the audience learn that we have to accept each other the way we are, that we "share a common humanity, regardless of our defects" (23). Other disability plays include William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1960), Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* (1979), and Brian Clark's *Whose Life is it Anyway?* (1979).

Children of a Lesser God is the second of three dramas in which Medoff uses the disability metaphor. The heroine's mental retardation in *Firekeeper* serves the same purpose as the protagonist's deafness in *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Hands of Its Enemy*. Their handicaps demonstrate women's victimization in a patriarchal society. As in *Firekeeper* and traditional Westerns, men in *Children of a Lesser God* regard women as "sexually available and community property" (French 62). James' role as Sarah's teacher

apparently justifies his attempts to make her over in his "image." On the other hand, the teacher's claim that it is his duty to dominate his student also causes the lovers' failure to communicate. Sarah's deafness, in turn, has made her defiantly independent, despite her inferiority. In the end, both James and Sarah abandon gender stereotypes and respect each other as equals.

James Leeds, the self-centered teacher at a school for the deaf, obliquely recalls the Old Western tradition. He compares himself to a "hero" who "never gets caught on an important mission." Nevertheless, his important and surprisingly secretive mission involves more than just teaching the deaf student Sarah Norman how to speak and lipread. Sarah suspects that James would also love to teach her the "joys of sex with a hearing man." Orin, another of James' students, supports Sarah's view that most teachers merely "pretend to help but really want to glorify themselves." James, of course, denies any ulterior motives or sexual thoughts and presents himself as a sixties' idealist, still advocating causes not "simply self-serving."

Their mutual distrust and hostility lead to a battle of the sexes reminiscent of *The Wager* and *The Halloween Bandit*. Sarah considers James' well-intentioned offer to "help" as chauvinistic so long as he denies the equality of her world, which she calls a "silence full of sounds." And she mistakes James' uncharacteristic perseverance as a teacher as proof of his primarily sexual intentions. Her past experiences of communicating with men solely through sex reaffirm Sarah in her belief. The director of the school also warns James not to "fornicate with the students." James, however, surprises him and Sarah by promising her, "I'll love you for having the strength to be yourself." And he surprises the audience by marrying her at the end of the first act.

James' subsequent change of mind and Orin's selfish endeavor to enlist her for his purposes justify Sarah's misgivings. They also

demonstrate men's reluctance to give up their dominance over women. An apprentice teacher at the school, Orin initiates a civil rights commission appeal in order to force the school to employ more deaf instructors. Obviously thinking of his own career, Orin expects Sarah to remain a "pure deaf person," so she can support his case before the commission. And James, having meanwhile reversed his opinion, again regards her deafness as a challenge to change her into a hearing person. Sarah reacts with anger, "I don't know which role I'm supposed to play. Orin treats me like an idiot. You treat me like an idiot."

Like the women in *The Wager* and *The Halloween Bandit*, Sarah temporarily decides that she must rely on no one but herself. Consequently, she rejects both James' and Orin's help and decides to write her own speech for the appeal, a speech directed as much to James as to us, the audience:

I want to be joined to other people, but for all my life people have spoken for me. She says; she means; she wants. As if there were no I. As if there were no one in here who could understand. Until you let me be an individual, an I, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you can do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined.

We cannot share a relationship. (89-90)

The audience and James have to let Sarah be herself, be different if she so chooses. Since James refuses, she leaves him only to return with the realization that she tried to change him as much as he attempted to remake her in his image. *Children of a Lesser God* ends with a volatile truce between the lovers, and vicariously between the sexes. In different languages—he speaks, she signs—they vow, "I'll help you if you'll help me." James and Sarah stop struggling to bring each into the other's world and discover a world of their own, where men and women assume new identities.

James' and Sarah's vow also sums up the action of *The Hands of*

Its Enemy, Medoff's second drama involving a deaf heroine and her male "therapist." Like *Children of a Lesser God*, *The Hands of Its Enemy* successfully ran in Los Angeles before it premiered at the City Center Theater in New York in October 1986. Medoff's play about a play's production at a university resident theater in the Southwest concerns the classical struggle between director and playwright. Marieta Yerby, the deaf author of her first "autobiographical" play, realizes that she loses control over her script and her life to Howard Bellman, the production's aggressive director. In the end, her play turns out to be therapeutic for both Howard and Marieta. Howard faces the obvious parallels between his own behavior and the hero's drunken profligacy, whereas Marieta is forced to confront her father's raping her as a child. Once they are true to themselves and each other, they can make the play and their relationship work.

The Homage That Follows is as indebted to *The Halloween Bandit* as *The Hands of Its Enemy* is to *Children of a Lesser God*. If the media personality Grace barely manages to save herself, Lucy Samuel in *The Homage That Follows* has no such luck. Also having arrived at a turning-point in her career, Lucy falls prey to the attack of the confused New Westerner Archie Landrum. Ready to change her life, Lucy faces either rape or death at the hands of the emotionally and sexually depraved young man in her rural New Mexico home. He temporarily finds accomplices in two other men, who share his feeling of emasculation and his urge to abuse the famous media star physically, all of which brings to mind *The Wager*.

The Homage That Follows premiered in October 1987 in yet another co-production by the American Southwest Theatre Company and the New Mexico Repertory Theatre. As the play opens, Lucy is already dead and Archie in jail because he confessed before his attorney could arrive. The play then traces in one long flashback the

events that led to Lucy's homicide. After that flashback, the play ends with Archie's murder in his cell. Deputy Sheriff Gilbert Tellez and lawyer Joseph Smith, who earlier professed to understand why "men murder women," avenge Lucy and redeem themselves.

Archie extends the list of Medoff's male Westerners who live in the past. The "short little, pear-shaped" Archie cites as his major goal in life "getting up on a big tractor and disking a plot of earth." His hatred of the modern West and glorification of the rural West stand in sharp contrast to his vast knowledge of the sciences. Holding a Ph.D. in mathematics, Archie is as intellectualized as Leeds in *The Wager*, whom women have admired yet rarely considered for a "sexual liaison." Kaybee Samuel, the mother of the deceased, comments, "No wonder young men get Ph.D.'s and go to work on small farms." A schoolteacher and single woman homesteader, Kaybee modernizes a classic stereotype of the Western woman. Ironically, she plays a major role in her daughter's death. She employed Archie as a farmhand and surrogate son because her own son died fighting in the Middle East.

Sexually and professionally as independent as any woman in Medoff's heroine plays, Lucy needs no men in her life to satisfy her. She describes her sex life: "I can only achieve orgasm by touching myself." Lucy also takes understandable pride in her hit show that has run for five years. And yet, like Grace, Lucy suffers from emotional deprivation because she never performed "so powerfully that people's very lives would be changed." The only life that Lucy changed is her own. As she approaches thirty, her career is waning and she seeks relief in drugs, alcohol, and yoga. Archie correctly observes, "She was neither what she wanted to be nor what the world advertised her to be." Then he shoots her. Lucy, like Red Ryder, will never come back.

As in *The Halloween Bandit* and *Stumps*, Medoff connects physi-

cal and sexual violence. Archie first saw the "famous local naked person" Lucy on a movie screen. When meeting her in person on the New Mexico farm, he offers her a supposedly "career-changing" script. Not surprisingly, she rejects both her role as a "naked hostage awaiting ransom" and Archie's advances, thereby inducing him to stage his script on the spot. He holds her hostage with a gun, tries to rape her, and shoots her when she resists. Like all of Medoff's emasculated men, Archie runs amuck in Old Western style. Like Medoff's emancipated women, Kaybee discovers a life without a "surrogate husband, son." Neither she nor Lucy could have saved Archie. Men and women can only save themselves.

DREAMS OF LONG LASTING

With the publication of his first novel in 1992, Medoff realized a "dream of long lasting." Three decades earlier, as an undergraduate at the University of Miami, he had begun a novel that he never finished. In 1987, Medoff took a leave for six months from his post as dramatist-in-residence at New Mexico State University. He and his family went to Hawaii, where he wrote the first draft of *Dreams of Long Lasting*. This coming-of-age novel marks the stations of Medoff's own life, and it fuses his major dramatic themes without this genre's restrictions on time and space.

The plot of *Dreams of Long Lasting* moves freely between West and East. It begins at Stanford University in the early seventies. Jacob Landau, a doctoral student of English from Miami, meets the mysterious actress Leslie Ann Masterson. He writes a play for her that moves from Austin to off-Broadway to Hollywood. Having collaborated on the original production, Leslie and Jake part ways thereafter. She gets pregnant, insists on an abortion, and disappears, while he returns to Miami to marry Sandra, his former girlfriend. Sandra and Jake move to Albuquerque, where he starts

teaching at the University of New Mexico. But wherever he is, Leslie keeps haunting him until she returns in person, seven months pregnant and with a gun. The novel ends with Leslie giving birth in a New York hotel and Jake assuming responsibility as a father. Both have grown up.

Quite obviously, there are numerous parallels between Jake's and Medoff's lives. The first-person narrator also writes to "exorcise" his "demons from within." He reflects on conflicts and situations similar to those Medoff may have had at some point during his career. Among those are the roles of author, director, and actor in a production, the conflicts between regional and New York theater, the lure of Hollywood. Like Medoff, whose screenplay credits include *Clara's Heart* (1988) and *City of Joy* (1992), Jake faces tough decisions: should he continue teaching, should he leave New Mexico, should he write for the stage or the screen?

The main conflicts in *Dreams of Long Lasting*, however, concern the characters' personal growth. Jake has to find the right balance between his Eastern and Western traits, embodied in two women: one he loves passionately and one he learns to love. The first scene foreshadows the plot of the novel. A Jewish Eastern kid tries to impress a Western woman, whose remark "guacamole" changes his life. He sets out to rescue her from the hands of Howard Bellman, whose name and role are identical with those in *The Hands of Its Enemy*. Howard is Jake's tough-talking and tequila-drinking alter-ego and, later in the book, the director of his play. Yet it is Leslie herself who thwarts Jake's heroic efforts. She tells him, "You shouldn't work so hard at being someone you're not." Then she leaves, disappearing for the first time in her black-and-gold DeSoto.

Leslie is the archetypal Western girl. Half-Cherokee, she grew up in Santa Fe, takes Jake on fishing and camping trips, and goes out to the shooting-range "because killing can be very spiritual."

She "acts" by instinct and has a family history as brutally violent as that of the West. Her father abused her; her mother killed herself. Locked into a relationship "with a man unequal to her needs and a past she couldn't escape, she had seen no alternative but . . . to assert her independence." And yet, like Sam Shepard's mystery lady in *Fool for Love* (1983), Leslie keeps following Jake across the continent. She calls him at 3 in the morning and registers her telephone in his name. She checks into the same hotels he does, using the pseudonym Lorna Greene from *Bonanza*. At one point, aiming at Jake, she shoots Howard. In the end, Leslie calls once again. But even after her suicide attempt, she refuses to reveal her location because she expects Jake to find her.

A Jewish princess from Miami, Sandra Pollock is the very opposite of Leslie. Jake dated—and dumped—her at a time when he "needed someone to think highly" of him. She still does after his breakup with Leslie. To Sandra, who still lives a sheltered life with her parents, Jake seems like a Western outlaw: His arrest because of an anti-war demonstration made headline news in the Miami papers. She also admires his raw sexuality, contrasting sharply with her own experience, or lack thereof. As Jake tells her, "It's been a long time, Sanny, since I've seen a girl your age wearing grown-up clothes and hair that isn't her own."

Having married for all the wrong reasons, they experience in the West what welds them together. Leaving behind "the 'Vette, the allowance, the down payment," they head West to Albuquerque like "two pioneers." While Jake accepted the position because the department chair reminded him of Jingles in the old T.V. show "Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok," Sandra sees the West as offering new opportunities. She opens a clothing store, takes classes, and has an affair with her Mexican-Indian professor. She dissociates herself from her Eastern background and enjoys her new independence, which allows her and Jake to "start from scratch."

Even more important, though, are the changes in Jake's and

Leslie's lives. Like Stephen in the "Red Ryder" trilogy, Jake manages to resolve his obsessional relationship with Leslie and rescues her after all. But unlike the Old Western heroes, he stays and accepts his new role as a grown-up. So does Leslie, who confesses, "I was scared every day we were together because I believed in my heart we could grow up together. And I'm so stupid that even at this very minute, this second, in my heart, I still do." Appropriately, the novel ends "at noon"—rather than at sunset—with Jake on his way to the hospital ready "to feed a child."

CONCLUSION

Medoff is one of many Western American dramatists who emerged in the troublesome 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, writers such as Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson, Preston Jones, Luis Valdez, Edward Bullins, and David Henry Hwang created their new and powerful drama about the West at a time when the region's popular culture myth had fallen into disfavor. Medoff contributes to this "Western renaissance" by holding a synthetic and revisionist view of the West. His drama portrays a society in transition from Old to New West, in which the classic division between wilderness and civilization adopts fresh guises.

In his hero and heroine plays, Medoff reinterprets the old view of the West as an essentially male and patriarchal territory. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis first portrayed the West as the realm of the single, ruggedly masculine hero, and it has been perpetuated ever since in countless popular novels, Hollywood movies, and television series. In Medoff's West, men and women transcend old stereotypes. Women grow to be men's equal partners rather than helpmates or civilizers. Men also learn to appreciate equality, as they transform from would-be cowboys into responsible fathers and husbands. In short, women become more,

men less independent, fighting one another along the way. The battle of the sexes in Medoff's drama restages the Western conflict between the wild and the tame. In Medoff's variation, however, either sex can play either role.

Medoff's drama of shifting gender relations has gained him regional, national, and international prominence. Drama, because it speaks in the present and generates in audiences a sense of shared experience, has the power to induce people to change. Therefore, Medoff chose drama in order to touch, teach, and transform men and women. Western or non-Western, he explains in his introduction to *Children of a Lesser God*:

A play can actually be what every playwright dreams in some part of him that his work should be: something that binds people together, makes them laugh and cry, alters their perspective, something finally that—in any language, anywhere on the planet—deeply affects people, if only for a little while. (viii)

Medoff's vast experience as an actor and director aids him in his writing. Medoff directed several of his own dramas and other works by Western writers, including Lanford Wilson's *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973) and Jack Heifner's *Vanities* (1976). Some of the Western roles he played include Teddy in *When You Comin Back, Red Ryder?* and Lee in Sam Shepard's *True West* (1979).

While succeeding in Broadway and world theaters, Medoff has never abandoned his strong commitment to Western American culture and theater. He has worked closely with the Dallas Theater Center and Texas playwright Preston Jones, who acted in the Dallas premiere of *Firekeeper*. And Medoff has collaborated with another important regional theater in the West, the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. But most important, Medoff has built his own theater group, the Southwest Theater Company. Most of his plays have premiered in Las Cruces and then moved to Santa Fe

and Albuquerque, the joint residences of the New Mexico Repertory Theatre until 1994. This longstanding alliance between New Mexico's theater and its most widely respected dramatist recalls similar arrangements in the West, such as those between Jones and the Dallas Theater Center or Valdez and Teatro Campesino. Through both his life and his writing, Medoff continues to contribute to the American West's culture after the heyday of the Red Ryder and the Laredo Kid.

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