

Telling Tales: Theater premieres original treatment of American legends

By [Bridgette M. Redman](#)



Courtesy photo

The cast of "Tall Tales" at Live Theatre Workshop prepares to put their unique spin on American folklore.

When it comes to American tall tales — passed down orally for generations — the telling has always been as much a part of the story as the content itself. The characters in them are larger than life and the details are stretched past the point of being believable.

And yet, they live in our collective memories, delighting us from childhood to adult, which is why Richard Gremel and David Ragland have paired up again to bring an original musical to Live Theatre Workshop's Children's Theatre.

Running from Friday, July 15, to Sunday, July 31, “Tall Tales: Legends of America” has five storytellers recreating the stories of Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill and John Henry.

It uses song, puppetry, shadow work and representational set pieces and props to recreate the magic of these traditional American tales.

“The idea was to really help expose an audience that may not have been familiar with some of the myths and folklore around the history of America,” said Ragland, who has been creating plays and musicals with Gremel for 15 years.

“He loved the idea of rearranging some of America’s folk songs to go along with that and then mix in some originals.”

The five actors move in and out of each other’s stories, sometimes narrating, sometimes taking center stage. Gremel said he wanted to focus on the idea of storytelling and how we tell stories to each other.

“We hear stories when we were kids, we hear them in school, we tell stories to other people,” Gremel said. “These stories of these characters have been passed along over the years; they’ve had different renditions. They’ve all been told in different ways.”

When Gremel started to write this musical, he looked up as many American tall tales and folklore as he could before settling on the three. Ultimately, he chose that trio because the trifecta of stories had morals to teach.

John Henry taught that setting your sights high and looking to the future while trying to achieve your dreams. Paul Bunyan’s moral is that you should always lend a helping hand and help someone you see in need. For Pecos Bill, being kind to others was important.

“These morals sort of shaped the rest of the play,” Gremel said. “Kids can gain a lot from those morals, but I think also if we have adults in the audience, they’re going to gain a lot from a reminder of those morals as well and what they can take away from these stories that they have heard in their past. Those types of morals still ring true today.”

Ragland said an overarching goal of the show is to inspire young people to be the best versions of themselves.

“One of the overall themes is that you can tell your own story and that you can be a legend, too,” Ragland said. “The main theme song of the play is called ‘You Can Be a Legend Too.’ It’s a play that’s intended to be empowering to our children and youth — that they can really make anything possible if they put their mind to it.”

Much of the set is minimal to keep the focus on the story. Gremel and Ragland both said that they’re making the most of the story’s theatricality to make it visually appealing and interesting.

Paul Bunyan, for example, carries around a puppet of his blue ox. The tornado that Pecos Bill lassoes is made with a swirling tube of fabric. When Paul Bunyan chops redwood trees, there is a ladder that represents the tree.

“The presentation will be fresh and also surprising to audiences who expect to see something more traditional,” Ragland said.

“We’ve got a lot of fun visuals, we’ve got shadow puppetry, we’re using props in ways that we normally wouldn’t use props to create these characters and the costumes are a lot of fun,” Gremel said. “It’s going to be just a great experience to watch and see.”

The cast features Tyler Gastelum (Paul Bunyan, ensemble), Rafael Acuna (Pecos Bill, ensemble), Gianbari Bebora Deebom (John Henry, ensemble), Brian McElroy (ensemble) and Amaya Ravenell (ensemble).

Gremel said that even though they did readings while developing this show, he couldn’t have imagined what it would be once the actors started bringing it to life.

“Our one actor who is playing Paul Bunyan, he just has really turned him into this gentle teddy bear,” Gremel said. “There’s this moment where he has built a strong relationship with this ox. Even though you’re seeing a puppet onstage, it just feels so real.”

He also has high praise for Deebom, saying that she “does an amazing job of really bringing heart to the John Henry story.”

Ragland said that she manages to capture not only the Henry character, but the other unnamed characters she plays.

“When she plays John Henry, you’ll see her using her lower register and she’ll sort of have a real stoic stance,”

Ragland said. “Then when she’s in one of her other roles, she will be more playful and have traditional Western accents.”

All the actors, he says, are good character actors with strong singing voices.

Gremel has enjoyed watching the elaborate variety of physicality each actor brings to their roles. He credits them with bringing a lot of ideas to the show on how to make things work.

“I told the actors in the beginning if you have an idea, bring it forward, because this really is about us telling stories and utilizing what we have,” Gremel said. “It really has been a great collaborative process.”

Because the stories are folk tales, Gremel wanted the music to capture the sound of classic folk music or bluegrass. As a former member of the Tucson Boys Chorus, he said he was also attracted to old country Western songs. They were genres he felt fit well into this show. He found some traditional

songs, such as “A Lumbering,” that fit well into the show. Other familiar songs include “Home on the Range” and “Get Along Little Doggies.” There are also new songs.

“If you didn’t know any of the traditional songs, you would have a hard time guessing which one was traditional and which one was original,” Gremel said. “David has just done such a great job of making it all sound like it all fits together.”

Ragland hopes that people of all ages will come out to see the show.

“It’s a unique presentation around some of the tales and folklore that you’ve grown up with, but these are fresh takes,” Ragland said. “The marriage of the music and the dialog really elevates the whole experience.”

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