

Puccini's Wild Western

La Fanciulla del Ovest (The Girl of the Golden West)

By Kathleen Watt

IS PUCCINI'S *La fanciulla del Ovest* the ultimate Spaghetti Western? Is its heroine Minnie Falcon the American frontier Valkyrie? No less an observer than Igor Stravinsky called *Fanciulla* "...a horse opera, extraordinarily right for television, with a Marshall Dillon and professional Indians...."

To some, *Fanciulla* is a hybrid oddity featuring improbably Italianate Forty-Niners on horseback. Detractors sniff at "contrivances" like the capture of wounded bandit Ramerrez, revealed by his own blood dripping from his hiding place in Minnie's cabin loft. But playwright David Belasco vouched for the authenticity of this incident, related to him by his father, who had witnessed it. And half a century later, movie director Howard Hawkes used the same device even more audaciously in *Rio Bravo* (1959), where the bad guy's blood oozes from the rafters into Dean Martin's beer.

By any measure, Puccini's opera nails more truths about 1849 California than do many certified legends of the West. And no wonder. Puccini's source was David Belasco – California son of a sometime gold miner, child actor on the mining camp theater circuit. What's more, Puccini himself had witnessed Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Milan, with its dozens of ex-cowhands, real Indians, trick riders and shooters, its hundreds of horses, cattle, and buffalo. Despite reservations about Western literature ("...it's all a hotchpotch and sometimes in very bad taste..."), Puccini would ultimately develop from Belasco's play *The Girl of the Golden West* one of the earliest and most durable Westerns in the genre's extensive canon.



Fanciulla Act II at NYCO.

The universal allure of the Wild West always lay more in its myth than in its history, and it has never flagged. In 1900, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was the most famous American in Europe—a genuine frontiersman, turned global ambassador for his panoramic fantasy of what had been his real life, sometimes heroic, sometimes barbarous, in a world already bygone. Actually, most Wild West Show performers were ex-frontiersmen, consciously revising a collective history, for private reasons. For the reality of the American West was both marvelous and terrible. In literature, song, and spectacle, the narrative by which reality would become tolerable was steadily embroidered in retelling, until history slid into the comforting lilt of legend. And the world seemed to fall under the spell of America's myth of itself.

Meanwhile, at his workbench in New Jersey, Thomas Edison had invented motion pictures. His first experiments were one-minute films of Buffalo Bill's specialty acts. This fantasy of the West would thus validate and popularize Edison's futuristic invention—which in turn would validate and popularize the West's fantasy-freeze-framed history, or some version of it, even as the real West faded away.

Silent Westerns illumined this uncanny overlap of history and myth. In *The Bank Robbery* (1908), for example, convicted bank robber Al Jennings plays himself, in his own film recreation of his most famous hold-up. Jennings went on to a career in directing, having reinvented himself, and history, in the very process of recording it.

Studio directors like D. W. Griffith soon made art of Edison's technology, perfecting the aesthetic of the screen Western, establishing its richness, its iconography, its viability as metaphor—and securing its commercial potential. The Western imagery that developed would serve a shifting range of thematic material throughout a century to come.

Gilbert M. "Bronco Billy" Anderson created the West's cowboy prototype—the decent, uncouth ruffian, ripe for redemption through religion or a woman's love—which would be refined in a parade of matinee idols. Silent film megastar William S. Hart was moviedom's first cowboy legend—and last authentic movie cowboy. Like Cody, Hart was



Bronco Billy

frontier-bred and proud to portray himself. But unlike Buffalo Bill or Bronco Billy, Hart demanded perfect realism, in set-dressing and story line. When that became impossible, he quit. "Boys," says Hart's character in his last movie, *Tumbleweeds* (1925), "it's the last of the West." Into Hart's hoofprints rode Tom Mix, rodeo champion and retired Texas Ranger. Like Cody and Hart, Mix directed and produced his own star vehicles. Unlike Hart, Mix blithely cultivated a breezy persona and elaborate stunts that bore little relation to authentic cowboy life (nor did he regret finally leaving the movies for the circus).

When sound came to movies, the trail forked. The Western was relegated to B-movie studios, where bit players from the silents—Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter—began singing congenially of an idealized West, and became movie stars. Singing cowboys from all over already ruled the radio waves. John I. White, of Washington, D. C., was "The Lonesome Cowboy," on-air in New York City. Singing cowgirls Dolly and Millie Good called themselves—naturally—"The Girls of the Golden West."



John Wayne as outlaw hero

Meanwhile, A-studios developed genre directors whose actors became cultural and thematic icons. In the breakout Western *Stagecoach* (1939), John Ford directed John Wayne as an outlaw hero – brawny, upright, taciturn. Generations of moviegoers identified that hero with Wayne's inscrutable face. In *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Ford cast Henry Fonda as the conflicted Wyatt Earp, epitomizing the noble outsider unable to join the society he serves. As *The Gunfighter* (1950), Gregory Peck was an unreconstructed celebrity gunfighter who becomes a

viable spokesman for nonviolence when he names as "the toughest man I ever knew" his friend, a newly-married rancher and sheriff who "doesn't even wear a gun."

As Sheriff Will Kane in Carl Foreman's *High Noon* (1952), Gary Cooper and his grave features will forever exemplify the nuanced anguish of a hero whose community finds itself uncomfortably coping with an old law in a new order. *Rio Bravo* (1959) is Howard Hawkes'

manly rebuttal to *High Noon*. Here, lawman John Wayne is never unsure of himself, never nuanced, never domesticated. Hawkesian men stand by their friends, display grace under pressure, and remain outside society – as they must, suggests Hawkes – in order to protect and absolve society. *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is director Nicholas Ray's overt allegory of the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of that decade. Joan Crawford is Vienna, the gender-bending, lip-curling, black-trousered saloonkeeper with an ex-gunslinging ex-lover. Together they fend off a hate-mongering community that flushes out informants and lynches nonconformists, in broad allusion to the anti-Communist hysteria of McCarthyism.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, television had arrived. The singing cowboys of the B-Westerns sashayed smoothly over to the new medium, and reigned tunefully for a decade. Cowboy dramas also flourished on TV, often to soundtracks cribbed from the concert hall. Rossini's *William Tell* Overture will forever be linked with “The Lone Ranger”, although the strains of Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* also frequently accompanied the wandering Masked Man.

Here the evolving Westerns of popular culture suggest the way myth works in consciousness: The authenticity of the genuine ex-Texas Ranger Tom Mix yielded to the TV Lone Ranger of actor Clayton Moore, late of the circus trapeze. In 1979, twenty-three years after the last episode of that long-running series, Moore languished in litigation over ownership of his fictional character's trademark mask, red neckerchief, and powder-blue costume (which he himself had designed), desperate for vestiges of an identity that had never been real.



Clayton Moore as The Lone Ranger

But myth persists. Westerns of the 1960's and '70's, mirroring the soul-searching of contemporary Americans, often deflected sociopolitical anarchy into cowboy send-up. Actor Lee Marvin won an Oscar for his farcical portrayal of a sodden gunfighter in *Cat Ballou* (1965), co-starring the antiwar activist Jane Fonda. *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) followed – that wacky musical in which Marvin shares a wife with perennial cowboy Clint Eastwood.

When American Westerns began to sag, Europeans developed their own, remembered affectionately as "Spaghetti Westerns," because many were filmed in Italy – and were famously bad. That is, until the obscure director Sergio Leone cast Eastwood in *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964). Violent, cynical, visually arresting, Leone's films became classics. Their mordant fatalism fitted the antiheroism and volatility of those times, and Ennio Morricone's soundtrack was an quasi-operatic synchronization of action and music which has since become the genre's standard.

Later twentieth-century American Westerns are the bitter flipside of mythologized idealism. Heroism is simply irrelevant in the libidinous mining camp of Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (1962). Of playwright Sam Shepard's Westerns, theater historian A. S. Moffett writes, "[T]he savage within has combined with the savage without to compound the savagery..."

The theme of Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*—savagery redeemed through personal honor and selfless love—was received at its 1910 premiere by a world on the threshold of modernity, ruined wilderness behind, worldwide mechanized war ahead. At *Fanciulla's* "happy ending," the lovers walk not into a California sunset but into snow-drifted mountain canyons, shadowed by the lonesome miners' hopeless farewell. In 1939, on the brink of another world war, director John Ford ended *Stagecoach* with the outsider couple riding into the backcountry where, says Doc, "they'll be saved from the blessings of civilization."

The Western continues to function as American myth, devotedly revisited by filmmakers like Eastwood and Kevin Costner. Just as surely, Puccini's *Fanciulla* holds its own as a colorful parable of frontier times, provocative in its own era, compelling in ours.

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