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Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*Johnny
Guitar*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Johnny Guitar

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Synopsis: *Johnny Guitar*

Lights illuminate the towering red rocks of the American southwest, a tumbleweed rolls across the stage. Suddenly, we hear the strains of a guitar and the lights reveal a slinky saloon singer. Thus begins the musical prologue to this campy spoof of fifties westerns.

A tall stranger, Johnny Guitar, pushes through the swinging doors of Vienna's Saloon and asks for the boss. Learning that she is busy, he goes to the kitchen for something to eat. Vienna, who hopes her lackluster saloon business will soon boom with the coming of the railroad, descends the stairs of her empty saloon singing soulfully, "Let it Spin."

The sound of horses announces the arrival of Emma Small, who owns half the town and who has a long-standing rivalry with Vienna, fueled most recently by Emma fighting to keep the railroad out of town and off her land. Emma is followed into the saloon by McIvers (who owns the other half of the town) and Jenks, carrying the dead body of Len, Emma's brother. Len was killed during a stagcoach robbery, and Emma is convinced that the dirty deed was done by the Dancin' Kid and his men, who are Vienna's friends. The Kid shows up, and Johnny re-enters, singing of course. The Kid and Johnny (who are both in love with Vienna) exchange unpleasantries, and McIvers gives them both twenty-four hours to get out of town. Vienna refuses to buckle to the pressure to leave, and Johnny vows to stay and help her. He and Bart get into a fight offstage, and Johnny displays his ability with a six-gun. Vienna sings "Branded a Tramp," and we learn that she and Johnny have a history, as the scene ends.

As the lights come up on scene two, Johnny, Vienna and the cowboy trio sing "Old Santa Fe," and Johnny and Vienna admit their feelings for each other. Vienna goes to the bank, which is owned by Emma, to withdraw her savings. The Dancin' Kid enters, intent on robbing the bank, and Vienna tries to talk him out of it. However, Emma is convinced that Vienna came to the bank to assist in the robbery.

Vienna returns to the saloon where the Dancin' Kid and his men meet her, as the sound of railroad construction blasting gets nearer and nearer. Meanwhile, Emma, McIvers and a posse are closing in on Vienna's place, intent on lynching somebody for Len's murder and other deeds. The Dancin' Kid and his men decide the blasting has made it impossible to get through the pass and hide out at their lair, a cabin in the mountains. The posse and Emma storm through the swinging doors demanding the Kid and his bunch—and, as Emma gloats, Vienna. They take Vienna to a bridge, put a noose around her neck, and prepare to hang her. Suddenly, a rifle shot rings out, the rope is cut, and Vienna falls to the water below where she is rescued by Johnny, who takes her to the lair. Once there, Johnny and the Kid clash, and Johnny Guitar reveals that he is really that infamous gunfighter, Johnny Logan. The kid, of course, sings "The Gunfighter," and Vienna sings "We've had Our Moments."

The next morning, Emma and the posse show up at the lair. The time has come for Emma and Vienna to settle their long-standing feud. Thus, they face off with six-shooters as they sing "Bad Blood." The shoot-out occurs and Emma emerges from the cabin and collapses.

The Dancin' Kid is taken into custody, but there is nothing to charge Vienna with, so she is free to go. Because of the railroad, her saloon will soon make her a rich woman.

Characters: *Johnny Guitar*

Vienna: The owner of the saloon on the outskirts of town, Vienna is earthy and tough as nails, but with a heart of gold. She still looks good in jeans and a gunbelt.

Johnny: A man with a past, Johnny is tall and laconic, but fearless and lightning-quick if provoked.

Emma: The owner of the bank and half the town, Emma is driven by her rage and envy of Vienna “and her kind.”

The Dancin’ Kid: The leader of the local wild bunch, the Dancin’ Kid is very charming and very dangerous. He is the “alpha male” until Johnny comes along.

McIvers: Owner of all the cattle and the other half of the town, McIvers is gruff and authoritarian. He is the boss in these parts, but is easily led and manipulated by Emma.

Turkey: Part of the Dancin’ Kid’s bunch, Turkey is very young and is a punk who is prone to gunplay.

Bart: Part of the Dancin’ Kid’s bunch, Bart is big and ornery.

Tom: The cook, Tom is simple and eager to please.

Carl: The quintessential ranch hand.

Eddie: A roulette spinner, Eddie is sort of a western poet, a philosopher-type.

Jenks: The stage driver, Jenks is a bit of a simpleton.

Bill: An employee at the bank, Bill is the anxious clerk-type.

Hank: A cowboy.

Sam: The bartender, Sam’s a bit crusty, a skeptic.

Ned: A bank teller, Ned is just a regular good old boy.

Nicholas van Hoogstraten, Martin Silvestri, and Joel Higgins

By Don Leavitt
From *Insights*, 2006

It was the unlikeliest of source materials, but some-time actor and Emmy award-winning television producer Nicholas van Hoogstraten was sure that a stage musical based on the 1954 movie *Johnny Guitar* would be a hit. In his opinion, the campy Western cult classic had everything: an irresistible title, charismatic characters, romance, and conflict. Above all, van Hoogstraten said the movie had all the exaggerated emotions that a musical needs to make it seem natural when characters suddenly burst into song. “The movie had all this melodramatic dialogue that just begs to be sung,” he said

Eager to write the book, van Hoogstraten just needed to convince someone to help him write the music. His choice for collaborators? Martin Silvestri and Joel Higgins.

Higgins, best known as Ricky Schroder’s dad on the television sitcom *Silver Spoons*, remembers being skeptical of van Hoogstraten’s grand idea. His first reaction, he said, was wondering how to convert a movie Western, complete with horses, panoramic scenery, and gunfights, into a workable stage production. However, in a 2005 interview with the *Charlotte Observer*, Higgins admitted he was a pushover for anything to do with cowboys. “The more I watched the movie, the more I recognized that it was hysterical,” he told reporter Julie York Coppens. “And what I really sparked to was the idea of being able to riff on all these great 1950s songs” (“Quirky Western musical opens this week,” *Charlotte Observer*; Nov. 27, 2005).

Silvestri and Higgins, who had previously worked together on the musical *The Fields of Ambrosia*, patterned the music for *Johnny Guitar: the Musical* on everything from Roy Rogers to doo-wop 50s rock, with a smattering of lounge torch songs for good measure. The result, according to Higgins, enhances the sense that this is an arch-Western that doesn’t dive headlong into camp. Van Hoogstraten agrees: “The show is arch, not camp,” he told *Playbill Online*. “You’re gilding the lily if you make it camp.”

Van Hoogstraten, Silvestri and Higgins spent two years developing their *Johnny Guitar* for the stage, and a further two years acquiring staging rights. The success of their collaboration has been a surprise.

Since its 2003 off-Broadway debut, *Johnny Guitar: the Musical* has been an audience favorite, winning the 2004 Outer Critics Circle Award for Best off-Broadway Musical. In addition, Silvestri and Higgins were both nominated for the 2004 Drama Desk Award for outstanding music, and Higgins was nominated for the 2004 Drama Desk Award for outstanding lyrics.

Nicholas van Hoogstraten (book)

Nicholas van Hoogstraten began his theater career in summer stock and is a veteran of more than thirty musicals and plays. The New York native moved to television, winning an Emmy award for graphic design. He helped to create the KTLA morning news show in Los Angeles and was one of the original producers behind the launch of the FX cable network.

In 1996, van Hoogstraten returned to the world of theatre to produce the musical *The Fields of Ambrosia* by Martin Silvestri and Joel Higgins. Then in 2000, the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation commissioned him to produce *Embracing Freedom*, a dramatic look at immigration that ran for more than two thousand performances.

Johnny Guitar: the Musical is van Hoogstraten’s first musical and the second of only two plays he has written. The first, *On the Middle Watch: The Titanic Inquest*, debuted in 1999

at the New 42nd Street Theatre in New York and is an adaptation of the more than two thousand pages of actual inquest testimony gathered following the Titanic disaster. As a writer, van Hoogstraten is best known for his non-fiction book, *The Lost Broadway Theatres* (Princeton Architectural Press; 2nd Edition, September 1997), a comprehensive look at the great New York playhouses that traces the history of sixty Broadway theatres constructed before 1932.

Martin Silvestri (music)

To say music is Martin Silvestri's life would be an understatement. The Grammy-nominated recording producer, arranger, and composer has been credited on dozens of productions, including the original Broadway production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, as well as *Sesame Street* and television programs by MTM Productions and Aaron Spelling Productions.

Silvestri first worked with Joel Higgins on the score for *The Fields of Ambrosia*, which had its premiere in London's Aldwych Theatre. In addition to *Johnny Guitar: the Musical*, the two have also completed the scores for a new musical entitled *Storyville*, and a full-length animated feature entitled *Whistle*.

In his off-time, Silvestri spends several months touring in concert with his long-time love, Christine Andreas, an accomplished Broadway actress and popular cabaret artist. Silvestri can often be found accompanying Christine on piano, and he has been responsible for arranging and producing three of her critically acclaimed albums.

Joel Higgins (music and lyrics)

Best known for his role as a wealthy, and somewhat goofy, father on the NBC sitcom *Silver Spoons*, Joel Higgins has had an acting career of more than three decades. Although his face has been seen in several television shows over the years, his first love has always been the stage, where he's been featured in everything from *Oklahoma!* and *Kiss Me Kate* to *Brigadoon* and *The Foreigner*. In 1975, he received the Theatre World Award for his role in the Broadway production of *Shenandoah* and went on to play fan favorite Bruce Carson on the CBS soap opera *Search for Tomorrow*.

Higgins was born in 1943 and grew up in Bloomington, Illinois. He remembers performing in coffee houses to help pay for his education at Michigan State University; after graduating with a degree in advertising, he took a job with General Motors that lasted only six months. The call to perform was simply too great, and Higgins soon found himself performing in Europe. From there, he joined the U.S. Army and served as the Special Services Sergeant in charge of Entertainment at Camp Casey in Korea.

After the army, Higgins got his first writing credit with a musical called *The Green Apple Nasties*, which he sold to a producer and then starred in for two and a half years. While on tour, he was invited to play the role of Sky Masterson in a production of *Guys and Dolls*. His acting career has barely slowed down since. Higgins says he believes most people would be surprised to learn he also wrote well-known advertising jingles for several products, including M&Ms and Kool-Aid.

Shooting from the Lipstick

By Christine Frezza

The musical *Johnny Guitar* is Nicholas van Hoogstraten's unabashed tribute to the "B" western, to the 1954 movie of the same name, and to Joan Crawford, its star. It's probably no coincidence that the musical opened at the Century Center for the Performing Arts on March 23, 2004, Miss Crawford's birthday.

Since then, *Johnny Guitar* has had international success, somewhat bewildering the critics, since at first glance, the musical seems a parody of a parody, with its larger-than-life characters, its amazing coincidences, its almost melodramatic emotions, and its musical homage to cowboy songs. But audiences love it, for obvious, and for some not-so-obvious reasons.

The women in *Johnny Guitar* fit right into the stereotypes of women in westerns, who tend to be of three types: the "nurturer" (as exemplified by Dr. Quinn, *Medicine Woman*), the outlaw (*Calamity Jane*) and the saloonkeeper (*Miss Kitty* of *Gunsmoke* fame). The lead character, Vienna, is a strong example of this last type. She owns a saloon in town and not only wants to keep what's hers, but is also determined to bring the railroad to town. As such, she is a major threat to Emma Small (played in the movie by Mercedes McCambridge), not only as a business rival, but as a woman pursued by the man Emma wants.

The romance is set up as the main conflict: Emma is in love with the Dancin' Kid, who loves Vienna, who loves the new guy in town, *Johnny Guitar*. The stage is set for what the *New York Times* calls "commercial and . . . [romantic] rivalries . . . [with] a bank robbery, a lynch mob and a shootout between the leading ladies" (Ben Brantley, *New York Times*, Mar 24, 2004, E3).

In the *Johnny Guitar* movie, the romantic battle between Emma and Vienna paled in contrast to their off-screen rivalry; most memorably "with a drunken Joan at one point throwing all of McCambridge's clothes onto the highway." (*America's Real Sweetheart: a Biography of Joan Crawford*, <http://joancrawfordbest.com/biography.htm>, January 2006) However, the musical uses the romance as a frame for a larger conflict—the battle between the old West and the new.

Van Hoogstraten mentions "[the] nostalgia for that anachronistic way of doing things" (*Johnny Guitar*, Authors' Note), but his nostalgia is for the excitement of developing a new country, not clinging to a static past. His sympathies are with Vienna, whose objective is to become part of the bigger West, once the railroad comes in. Her love story is the more developed, she is the one who attracts both *Johnny* and the Dancin' Kid, and she is shown to have moments of doubt and tenderness. Her desire for progress is reflected by her wish to settle down: "Are you lonely from too long out on the road? / Believe me, I've been as broken as you are. / So I'm sayin', come on in, friend. Welcome home." (*Johnny Guitar*, p. 54)

In contrast, Emma Small, the antagonist, is an updated version of the rancher's daughter. She owns half the town, including the bank, and has no intention of relinquishing her position. Emma is single-mindedly determined to get rid of Vienna and what she represents, by running her out of town and returning to the status quo: "We were here first. . . . And before I'd allow anybody to steal / What we fought for and died for, / My heart would have to lie cold as a stone in my breast! / . . . Comin' here acting just like they belong! / Who do they think they are?" (*Johnny Guitar*, pp. 51-53).

When the bank is robbed, it's as though Emma herself has been robbed. She urges hanging and murder as an immediate fix, and she's willing to pull both rope and trigger, rather than listen to second thoughts from her supporters. Her love for the Dancin' Kid almost seems an afterthought—does she want him because she doesn't want Vienna to have him, or because he

also represents the past?

Emma's past is completely perfect—she won't admit to any flaws, and is determined to keep the future from invading her reality. Vienna knows she's been less than perfect, but will tolerate her mistakes in order to look forward to tomorrow.

Men aren't in charge of the action in this Western; they serve as mirrors of the women's enmity. Johnny and the Dancin' Kid represent a warmer, more human side. Like Vienna and Emma they compete for the West's future, but their conflict is centered on winning Vienna's heart, rather than taking over the territory. Although the authors want the audience to be amused by the men's argument over pots and pans, they're also reminding the audience that building a home is essential to what all participants in the battle are after. We're supposed to laugh at the idea of romantic illusion the men demonstrate but let them move us to side with Vienna, who also, at heart, wants this home.

As the women prepare for the ultimate showdown, we sense that Emma's vision of the future is doomed to failure, because she wants to keep people out; Vienna wins because she typifies the welcoming, inclusionary spirit of the new West.