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The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

Jethro Compton

Based on the short story by
Dorothy M. Johnson

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE was first produced by Jethro Compton Ltd in association with Park Theatre in London, England on May 16, 2014. The performance was directed by Jethro Compton, with sets by Sarah Booth, costumes by Jessica Knight, lights by Julian McCready, sound by Max Pappenheim, and music by Jonny Sims. The Production Stage Manager was Ben Karakashian. The cast was as follows:

RANSOME FOSTER . . . . . Oliver Lansley
HALLIE JACKSON . . . . . .Niamh Walsh
BERT BARRICUNE . . . . . Paul Albertson
JIM MOSTEN . . . . . Lanre Malaolu
LIBERTY VALANCE . . . . . James Marlowe
MARSHAL JOHNSON . . . . . Robert G. Slade
JAKE DOWITT . . . . . Hayden Wood
NARRATOR (VOICE) . . . . . Robert Vaughn

CHARACTERS

RANSOME FOSTER – 30-35 – From New York. Well-read and well spoken. He is stubborn and often arrogant but always well meaning.

HALLIE JACKSON – 25-35 – She's a strong-minded, rough talking girl. Underneath her rough exterior is a beautiful and caring individual.

BERT BARRICUNE – 40-50 – Bert is a true gunslinger. He is worn and battered looking but clearly handsome. He speaks only when he must.

JIM 'THE REVEREND' MOSTEN – 20-30 – Jim is a young black swamper. He is kind, enthusiastic, well-mannered, full of energy and easy to fall in love with.

LIBERTY VALANCE – 30-40 – Liberty is a Southern Gentleman, but his polite manner doesn't disguise the scars on his face. He is terrifyingly unpredictable.

MARSHAL JOHNSON – 50-60 – The Marshal talks the talk. When it comes down to it, he's a coward.

JAKE DOWITT – 25-40 – Jake is an enthusiastic reporter for a small local paper.

THE GANG – a few of Liberty's boys

MOURNERS – attending Barricune's funeral

DEPUTY – the Marshal's deputy

STUDENTS – local townsmen attending the school

SETTING

The Prairie Belle Saloon, Twotrees, America

TIME

1890 and 1910

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I wanted to write a play that captured what is for me the true spirit of the American West, the sense of hope and hopelessness, a stark landscape that inspired generations of stories and storytellers and captured the imaginations of so many.

For me, this play could take place in almost any setting; it is a universal story of love, pride and sacrifice – the Wild West simply offers the well-known and much loved canvas onto which these characters and their struggles are drawn. In a world where life is short and full of danger, the genre offers a unique opportunity for bold characters and bolder conviction. Twotrees is a town where people speak their mind and live their lives at the pace of a bullet – for a storyteller, what could be more satisfying?

To my colleagues, friends and family who have supported me on this journey and never once questioned why a boy from a Cornish village on the English coast spends his days and nights dreaming and writing of the great American West.

ACT ONE

Prologue – The Funeral of Bert Barricune – 1910

(We fade into darkness with the sounds of an orchestra tuning. As it comes to a close, we are in complete black.)

(From the silence, a single trumpet carries across the air. Moonlight spills into the saloon and illuminates the wooden coffin that stands in the centre on a table. Wind and rain batters the building.)

(The saloon is two stories high with an ornate wooden staircase that leads to a gallery above. From the gallery there are doors leading to other rooms. The bar runs almost half the length of the saloon. One entrance, with swing doors on the outside and glass shutters on the inside leads to the street and the town outside. Another door leads into a store cupboard. A piano sits at the bottom of the stairs. The saloon would clearly have been quite something in its day, but that day is long gone. The wallpaper has faded; dust collects on the faded portraits that hang on the walls. Years of candle wax drips on the timber and down the walls. Shuttered windows keep the worst of the heat out, but cracks allow light to break in.)

(As more light spills into the dusty old saloon, so too do the **MOURNERS**. *In the distance, we hear the whistle of a steam train.)*

NARRATOR. Bert Barricune died in 1910. The year the Great Railroad came to Twotrees and the year Halley's Comet tore through the night sky. Not more than half a dozen persons showed up for the funeral of old Barricune. Among them, an earnest young

reporter hoping for a human interest story, keen to find truth behind the legends that the old man had been something of a gunfighter in the early days. The mourners tiptoed in. One by one they filed past the coffin that contained the body of the old man; old Bert Barricune, who had been nothing – a nobody.

(The **MOURNERS** *take their places around the coffin and take up the solemn hymn.)*

COMPANY.

I'M JUST A POOR WAYFARING STRANGER
I'M TRAVELING THROUGH THIS WORLD OF WOE
YET THERE'S NO SICKNESS, TOIL NOR DANGER
IN THAT BRIGHT LAND TO WHICH I GO
I'M GOING THERE TO SEE MY FATHER
I'M GOING THERE NO MORE TO ROAM
I'M ONLY GOING OVER JORDAN
I'M ONLY GOING OVER HOME

(A **WOMAN**, *dressed in black, her face covered with a veil, enters. She carries a small bundle of simple cactus flowers.)*

I KNOW DARK CLOUDS WILL GATHER 'ROUND ME
I KNOW MY WAY IS ROUGH AND STEEP

(She tenderly places the flowers onto the coffin)

YET GOLDEN FIELDS LIE JUST BEFORE ME
WHERE GOD'S REDEEMED SHALL EVER SLEEP

(She leaves.)

I'M GOING THERE TO SEE MY MOTHER
SHE SAID SHE'D MEET ME WHEN I COME
I'M ONLY GOING OVER JORDAN
I'M ONLY GOING OVER HOME

(The **MOURNERS**, *except two, move to the bar.)*

DOWITT. Well I never. Blossoms of the prickly pear. Cactus flowers.

MOURNER. Seems suitable somehow, for the old man – flowers that grow on prairie wasteland.

*(***SENATOR FOSTER** *has entered the saloon. He is dressed in smart mourning attire.)*

DOWITT. I guess they're free if you want to pick them.

(He sees **FOSTER** *who has lit a cigar and stands next to the coffin.)*

Excuse me, Senator, I beg your pardon and please forgive my rudeness to come upon you on such a day of sufferin'.

FOSTER. Speak your piece, son.

DOWITT. I am a writer, sir. For the Chronicle, here in town. A modest paper that would benefit most greatly from an article featuring a man of your political importance. The obituaries, you see… Now, what I mean to say is –

FOSTER. I would be very happy to give you a few words for your paper, Mr…

DOWITT. Dowitt, sir. Jake Dowitt.

FOSTER. If you'll excuse me, Mr Dowitt. I will take the opportunity to sit as I am rather weary from my travels.

*(***FOSTER** *sits.)*

DOWITT. Did you come all the way from Washington, sir?

FOSTER. Yes I did. I arrived last night.

DOWITT. And the purpose of your visit to Twotrees?

FOSTER. The funeral of Mr Barricune.

DOWITT. Indeed a long way to travel. It would certainly interest my readers to know the nature of your relationship with the deceased.

FOSTER. He was my friend for many years.

DOWITT. When did you last see him?

FOSTER. Near twenty years ago, the last time I was in Twotrees – stood here in this very saloon.

DOWITT. Fascinating.

(The **MOURNERS** *move forward and take up the tune once more. They lift the coffin and carry it from the saloon.)*

MOURNERS.

I WANT TO WEAR A CROWN OF GLORY
WHEN I GET HOME TO THAT GOOD LAND
I WANT TO SHOUT SALVATION'S STORY
IN CONCERT WITH THE BLOOD-WASHED BAND
I'M GOING THERE TO MEET MY SAVIOUR
TO SING HIS PRAISE FOREVER MORE
I'M JUST A-GOING OVER JORDAN
I'M JUST A-GOING OVER HOME

NARRATOR. Who was this old man to Senator Foster? Who had he been? Congress was still in session; Foster had come all the way from Washington. Why would he bother, for an old wreck like Bert Barricune? He could not give the true answer. He was my enemy; he was my conscience; he made me whatever I have become.

Scene One – Ransome Foster Arrives in Twotrees – 1890

(Early afternoon. A single table with two stools sits in one corner of the room. **JIM MOSTEN** *has been setting up the saloon for business when* **BARRICUNE** *calls from offstage.)*

BARRICUNE. *(off)* Jim! Reverend! Goddammit, Jim. Get out here. I need a goddamn hand.

*(***HALLIE** *bursts in through the door above.)*

HALLIE. Jesus! What's all this yellin' about? You best go see what Bert wants, Jim, 'afore he yells the goddamn saloon down.

JIM. Yes, Miss Hallie.

BERT. *(off)* Jim!

(He leaves and returns shortly helping **BERT** *carry in an unconscious* **FOSTER**, *bruised and bloodied, clearly having taken a beating. His worn old suit is caked in dust and mud.)*

HALLIE. Bert Barricune! Does this look like a damn hospital?

BARRICUNE. Give it a rest, Jackson. I didn't have no choice. Clear the bar now.

HALLIE. Oh Jesus.

(They lay **FOSTER** *on the bar which* **HALLIE** *has cleared just in time.)*

Now listen here. If you bleed on my bar I will personally see to the end of your life. You hear me?

BARRICUNE. He hasn't been conscious for some time now.

HALLIE. Who is he?

BARRICUNE. Found him a couple of hours' ride north of the territory. Looked like he'd taken quite a beating.

HALLIE. Alright, Jim, how about you go and fetch the Doc? I'll see if I can clean some of this muck offa him.

*(***JIM** *leaves.* **HALLIE** *begins to clean* **FOSTER***'s wounds.)*

BARRICUNE. You look well, Jackson.

HALLIE. Jesus, Bert, this ain't no time for courting.

BARRICUNE. Just trying to entertain is all.

HALLIE. How about entertain yourself with getting some fresh water. And hand me a bottle of that whiskey.

*(***BARRICUNE** *hands her a bottle.)*

BARRICUNE. Why don't you leave that to the Doc?

HALLIE. The whiskey ain't for this fool.

*(***HALLIE** *takes a swig of whiskey.* **BARRICUNE** *fetches a bowl of fresh water.)*

BARRICUNE. You know, when I found him, he's lying half dead, bruised, sunburned and blisterin'. I says to him, 'I'll get you in the saddle. You reckon you can stay on there?' He opens one eye and almost cocks a smile. 'If I can't,' he says, 'If I can't, shoot me.'

HALLIE. Might have been kinder than dragging him all the way back into town to die here.

BARRICUNE. He ain't gonna die.

HALLIE. You wait till the Doc gets his hands on him.

BARRICUNE. Your place is looking nice, Jackson.

HALLIE. Good Lord, you're just dyin' to compliment something, ain't you? I must not be seeing right. I reckon this place is still a dump and I ain't any prettier now I'm covered in this dude's blood than I were before. But here you are saying how well I look and how nice my place is. Why not just get it over with and write me a damn poem, Bert?

BARRICUNE. Alright, Jackson. I can see this ain't the time.

(She raises her blood covered hands.)

HALLIE. You don't say. Now do we have any idea who this fella is?

BARRICUNE. I found a few letters in his pack. There.

*(***BARRICUNE** *holds out a collection of letters.)*

HALLIE. Oh Jesus, Bert. Don't make me pretend and read 'em. Just tell me what they say.

BARRICUNE. This one's addressed to a Mr Foster. Also found this.

(He holds up a leather bound black book.)

HALLIE. A Bible?

BARRICUNE. A law book.

HALLIE. What's he want with a law book out here?

BARRICUNE. Seems he's transporting a small library; all kinds of books in here.

*(***JIM** *returns.)*

JIM. Doc ain't coming. Says he's too busy with the plague.

HALLIE. That man is damn near useless.

JIM. Says to keep his wounds clean and get water in him. If he's still alive by sunset then the Doc might be able to come and have a look.

HALLIE. Well I'm damned if I'm gonna have him lying here all day.

BARRICUNE. Listen, Reverend. You got any of that hot sauce you were serving with them sausages?

JIM. I kept a couple o' jars for myself.

BARRICUNE. How about you fetch that out.

*(***JIM** *does.* **BERT** *grabs a mug and pours some coffee in, some whiskey and a lot of the hot sauce.)*

Alright. If this doesn't work then he's already lost.

(He holds **FOSTER***'s nose and pours the mixture into his mouth.)*

Stand back.

*(***FOSTER** *chokes awake, clutching his throat. The concoction sprays from his mouth.)*

Well, look at that.

HALLIE. I reckon that Doc's gettin' paid too much.

FOSTER. Water…

JIM. I'll get it.

*(***JIM** *heads off.)*

BARRICUNE. A regular miracle wouldn't you say, Reverend?

JIM. That I would.

FOSTER. Water…

HALLIE. It's coming. Hold on a minute.

FOSTER. My throat.

BARRICUNE. Give it a couple of hours and it won't be your throat you're worryin' about. That stuff'll burn a hole right through your ass.

*(***JIM** *returns. He pours water from the jug into a glass which he offers for* **FOSTER**.*)*

*(***FOSTER** *downs it in one and then pulls the jug from* **JIM***'s hands and gulps down the water, spilling it down himself.)*

(Slowly he turns to take in the room and the strangers staring at him. His eyes land on **BARRICUNE**.*)*

Want me to shoot you after all?

FOSTER. No. There's something I want to do first.

HALLIE. You ain't doing anything anytime soon. You're lucky to be alive.

FOSTER. I don't feel so lucky.

HALLIE. If Bert hadn't found you lying out there you'd be crow's food by now.

BARRICUNE. I ain't convinced he was worth the effort. I had to walk him on the saddle for near half an hour to get water. And God knows I loathe walking.

HALLIE. Mr Foster is it?

FOSTER. Yeah. Ransome… Ranse.

HALLIE. What you doin' out this way, Mr Foster? I'm guessin' with that accent this ain't your normal locale?

FOSTER. I was heading west.

BARRICUNE. Well you've arrived. How you findin' it so far?

HALLIE. Where you from?

FOSTER. New York.

BARRICUNE. Well, you've come a long way.

HALLIE. God knows why. What you lookin' for here, Foster?

BARRICUNE. Other than sunburn and a broken jaw?

FOSTER. I'm not sure.

HALLIE. Fame and fortune perhaps? Ain't that why everyone comes west?

FOSTER. Like I said, I'm not sure.

BARRICUNE. Perhaps you'll know once you've found it, Mr Foster.

FOSTER. What's that?

BARRICUNE. Your purpose.

FOSTER. Purpose?

BARRICUNE. Yeah. Like becomin' a punchin' bag. Looks like you can take a pretty good beatin'.

HALLIE. What happened out there, Foster? Why are you in this shape?

FOSTER. Like he says, I took a beating.

HALLIE. You ask for it?

FOSTER. What?

HALLIE. Did you deserve it? You shoot your mouth off? You try and cheat someone?

FOSTER. I didn't deserve it.

BARRICUNE. You know I respect a man who puts his hands up and take responsibility after a fight.

HALLIE. You ever taken responsibility, Barricune?

BARRICUNE. If I'm in the wrong and I asked for it – threw the first punch – yeah, I'll hold my hands up.

HALLIE. I'd like to see that.

FOSTER. I didn't throw any punches.

HALLIE. None at all?

BARRICUNE. Not even once you'd been hit the first time?

FOSTER. No.

BARRICUNE. Well that's where you went wrong.

HALLIE. So what happened?

FOSTER. I tried to stand up for an old guy. He was getting pushed around by a group of men alongside the road as I came past.

BARRICUNE. Well that sounds like askin' for it in my book.

HALLIE. What d'they want from him?

FOSTER. I don't know. Looked like sport.

HALLIE. Sport?

FOSTER. The wrong kind of sport. He was a black fella – the old guy – he was coloured. It looked like it was going the wrong way. The wrong kind of fun.

BARRICUNE. A regular Good Samaritan.

FOSTER. They turned on me and I guess he must have made a run for it.

HALLIE. How'd you get away?

FOSTER. I guess they reckoned I was dead enough.

BARRICUNE. You would have been if I'd not found you.

FOSTER. So you keep sayin'.

HALLIE. Now listen, Mr Foster. I ain't in the habit of putting myself in the line of fire. I need to know if there's any chance these fellas might come looking for you here.

FOSTER. No one's looking for me.

HALLIE. Well there's that at least.

*(***JIM** *heads off to the store room.)*

FOSTER. But I am looking for someone.

HALLIE. You see that, Bert? I've seen that look before. That's the look a man gets right before he goes out and gets himself shot.

BARRICUNE. No one here's gonna help you look for trouble.

FOSTER. It's not trouble I'm after. How about you send for the sheriff? I'll start there.

BARRICUNE. Fat lot of use that'll do you. But I'll send for the Marshal if it'll ease your soul. Well, Jackson, I'll bid my farewells.

HALLIE. Oh my heart bleeds to see you go.

BARRICUNE. I meant what I said before, 'bout you looking pretty. Take it or leave it.

HALLIE. Well you look like a sack of old horse manure, Barricune. Now get out before you start spouting daisies and pukin' daffodils.

BARRICUNE. Reverend.

*(***JIM** *enters carrying a mop and bucket and begins to clean the spilt water and sauce on the floor.)*

JIM. All the best, Mr Barricune.

*(***BERT** *leaves.)*

HALLIE. You feelin' any better, Mr Foster?

FOSTER. Some.

HALLIE. So long as it don't kill you, a beatin' can be good for a fella. Can toughen him up, in the long run.

FOSTER. If you say so… This your place?

HALLIE. Sure is. The Prairie Belle. Ain't much but keeps the pennies coming in and the rain off my head.

FOSTER. Quite something for a girl of your age. How d'you get the funds to secure a place like this?

HALLIE. My folks ran it for years before they were taken.

FOSTER. Cherokee?

(Silence. **JIM** *and* **HALLIE** *realise what he's talking about. They laugh.* **JIM** *takes the mop and bucket away, chuckling to himself.)*

HALLIE. Cherokee? Jesus Christ, you really ain't been this way before have you? Believe everything you read in them story books of yours? Cherokee! It were smallpox took my ma and pa.

FOSTER. So you got all this?

HALLIE. No one else to leave it to. My brothers were all killed. And before you ask it weren't by no Cherokee neither. They got drunk, they got angry and they got themselves shot. A drunk man may be arrogant, he may be foolish but a drunk man is not a coward. He

forgets to be afraid; he forgets he ain't a gunslinger from the legends, that he ain't the fastest shot in the West. He forgets that right up to the moment he hits the dirt. So you remember that if it's vengeance you're after. No one will mourn if you're shot full of lead. You won't be the first and you won't be the last. You want something to eat?

FOSTER. What you got?

HALLIE. Well we got rice. Or we got beans. Or we got the house special, rice and beans.

FOSTER. Any meat to go with it?

HALLIE. You take issue with horsemeat?

FOSTER. I do not.

HALLIE. Then there's some meat I can mix in.

FOSTER. But please, hold the sauce. I'm burned and blistered inside and out.

HALLIE. You'll get used to that. The sun here's hot, but the sauce is hotter. Reverend, how about you fry up some of that old mare and mix it in with the beans.

JIM. Any for you, miss?

HALLIE. Not for me, Reverend. *(to* **FOSTER***, with her best impression of a 'civilised' lady)* I can't abide eating an animal with personality.

*(***JIM** *leaves.)*

FOSTER. How come the minister works in the saloon?

HALLIE. Jim? He ain't no minister.

FOSTER. You call him 'Reverend'?

HALLIE. Do I? Well, what d'ya know?

(The **MARSHAL** *enters.)*

Afternoon, Marshal.

MARSHAL. Miss Jackson. So, this must be the tenderfoot.

HALLIE. Be careful of this one, Marshal, he's a learned man harbouring an agenda.

MARSHAL. Is that so?

HALLIE. Got himself a law book. He'll be after your job if you ain't careful.

MARSHAL. A law man, is it?

FOSTER. I am no law man, sir.

MARSHAL. Seems from what I've heard you ain't much good at defending yourself, let alone a town.

FOSTER. Rest assured I have no intention of running for your office. As soon as I am restored I will continue my journey. As soon as I am restored and my attacker has been reprimanded.

MARSHAL. And that's why you've summoned me here?

FOSTER. That's correct.

MARSHAL. Well in that case I'm gonna need a drink. Then I'll hear your piece. Miss Jackson?

HALLIE. One drink. Anymore and I'll need to see some coin.

(The **MARSHAL** *helps himself to a shot and then takes a seat.)*

MARSHAL. So, tell me, what is it you want?

FOSTER. I was attacked on the prairie.

MARSHAL. So I hear.

FOSTER. *(almost condescending)* Is that against the law around here?

MARSHAL. Well it certainly ain't customary. Who was they?

FOSTER. I don't know them. Three men. The boss was a greasy looking thing, black hair, scar across his face, dead eye.

(The **MARSHAL** *pulls a pipe from his pocket and loads it with tobacco.)*

MARSHAL. I know the man.

(He lights the pipe, puffing slowly.)

FOSTER. And?

MARSHAL. And what?

FOSTER. Jesus Christ! What's his name.

MARSHAL. The man who attacked you is Liberty Valance. Valance and a couple of his boys. Just what's your complaint now? They rob you?

FOSTER. No. They didn't search me.

MARSHAL. Take your gun?

FOSTER. I didn't have one.

MARSHAL. Steal your horse?

FOSTER. They gave him a crack with a quirt and he ran off.

MARSHAL. So they didn't take anything from you? Nothing at all? Well in that case I can't see you've got any legal complaint. Where was this?

FOSTER. I don't know.

HALLIE. North. Bert found him just north of the territory.

MARSHAL. So you don't even know what jurisdiction it was in. They knocked you around, that could happen to anyone. Man gets in a fight, maybe he speaks out of line, gets in a fight – could happen to anybody. Did he draw his weapon?

FOSTER. He struck me with his quirt.

MARSHAL. But he didn't draw his gun?

FOSTER. Why would he? I was unarmed.

MARSHAL. Sounds to me like a fair fight.

FOSTER. Three against one, how is that 'fair'?

MARSHAL. Well perhaps you best learn to weigh up the odds before getting yourself into trouble.

FOSTER. Well, Jesus! Thanks a lot!

HALLIE. Alright, Marshal. You've had your whiskey, best be getting along now – I don't want any more blood on my floor.

MARSHAL. Right you are, Miss Jackson. Thanks for the drink, much obliged.

(He goes to leave but stops at the door.)

You know, son. There's a reward out for Valance.

FOSTER. Yeah?

HALLIE. He don't need to hear about it, Marshal.

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