Why is melodrama theater popular in the West?
Spend a few summers in the Western U.S., and you might start noticing a type of production that is rarely found elsewhere: the summertime community melodrama.

Some locales - like Cheyenne - perform lengthy summertime runs of these farces for tourists - just like what the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players is performing now in conjunction with Cheyenne Frontier Days.

Even small-town festivals, like Encampment's Woodchoppers Jamboree and Pine Bluffs Trail Days, stage melodramas for evening entertainment, packed with local jokes.

But elsewhere, when a show, book or film is called melodramatic - a bad guy described as a "mustache twirler" - that's as a slight on the quality of writing; simplistic and two-dimensional.

But the Western melodrama not only embraces this super simplicity, it dials it up for laughs.

Take the villain in the current Little Theatre production. He actually wears a black cape and handlebar mustache, stalking the stage, chewing up the scenery, pushing people around with a full-throated "mwa-ha-ha-ha!"

It's not seen as serious theater, and little in the shows are taken seriously. But one fan of the melodrama says people don't fully appreciate these shows for the "great American art form" that they are.

"The American melodrama is considered an illegitimate stepchild of theater," says Gary McCarver,
founder of the National Directory for Melodramas.

By day, he is a financial planner in California. But in his spare time, he performs in theater and writes and sells melodrama scripts, encouraging his buyers to revise details, people and places to reflect their communities.

He sees in these shows a rich American theater experience with stock characters, audience participation and Western influences. He says they create their own unique experiences that you don't find in other forms of live theater.

So how did these shows come about?

The melodrama as we know it today has evolved from what was a simple play, written to promote morality or a single message, McCarver said.

Richard Hirsch, who is a cast member and co-director of this year's Little Theater show, refers to these as "the weekend cop show of the 19th century."

For one, these were "overly dramatic" plays, Hirsch said.

"Most of them were serious dramas with elements of comedy in them," he said.

"You have your hero, villain, heroine, sometimes a villainess, and comic relief characters to ease the tension and keep the audience interested."

Eventually, these productions died down, especially with new tides of the 20th century rolling in. McCarver points to the start of World War I and the growing motion picture industry.

But sometime after that, townspeople began to feel nostalgic and revived these production, putting on their own versions for local entertainment.

These were performed as parodies of the melodrama, Hirsch said. In fact, they were referred to as "the mellerdrammer," said in a slangy, Western-style dialect. (You can find a Mickey Mouse short from the 1930s on YouTube with that very title.)

This revival of the melodrama drew from many other influences besides the Victorian-era play.

They call up traveling theater, like old medicine shows and Shakespeare troupes, McCarver said.

Even Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which was popular across the U.S. and Europe before World War I, influenced these new community productions in the West, McCarver said.

And that ties into why melodramas are still popular with locals and visitors here.

Hirsch, who was involved in his first Little Theatre melodrama in 1977, says these shows tie into people's ideas about the Old West.

"You put in all the myths of the gunfighters, the cowboys, the miners, and all that kind of thing," he said.

Many grew up watching black-and-white Western films on TV, which are melodramas in themselves, with many of the stock characters you see in the stage production: bad guys in black hats, good guys in white hats, dim-witted but good-hearted sidekicks and damsels in distress.
For those who watched these flicks, "It's fun to go someplace and see it played out live on stage for laughs," Hirsch said.

And then comes the other key element: the audience. They get to take part.

At a recent production of the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players, the emcee warmed up the audience with a sing-along, then they were coached to boo at the villain, hiss at the villainess, cheer the over-dressed Gene Autry-like hero and sigh at the beautiful heroine.

(Because that's how you would imagine Wild West cowboys behaving at a play, right?)

By the middle of the second act the elements of the plot's conflict were set up and the action was taking off.

Then came a hilarious scene: The sidekick was wailing around the stage. The longer she wailed and sobbed, the funnier it got. She nailed it. By the time she blew her nose into her hands with a "Honk!" the audience was all-in, fully committed, putting more energy into boos and cheers, laughing louder, tossing out funny one-liners.

And the cast loves it, Hirsch said.

"It's really true: The actors feed off the audience," he said. "If you give good stuff to the audience, they'll give good stuff back to you."

That's the magic of the melodrama show.

Since the plots are simple, they make for easy audience participation, McCarver said. Plus, no one is on edge during a melodrama, he said.

"You see the villain and you immediately know what the outcome will be, which gives you comfort," he said. "You know that no matter how bad things may appear, good will prevail and he or she will get their due. And that even the hero who bumbles and stumbles through the play will end up still being heroic. It gives people hope."

So what you get with these shows is a communal experience between actors and audience, all playing a part to tell a simple story that ends happily with many jokes along the way.

So try it: See if you can leave this theater in a bad mood.

Related content: Melodrama do's and don'ts.

If you go

**What:** Old-Fashioned Melodrama, performed by the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players: "Song of the Lone Prairie or Poem on the Range"

**When:** Nightly through July 26, 7 and 9 p.m. (except Sundays, when it is 7 p.m. only); and July 30-Aug. 2, 7 p.m.

Tickets: $16, discounts for seniors, students and children. Visit www.cheyennelittletheatre.org

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