

GHOST RIDERS IN THE PIECHART –
JIM NEU’S *TARGET AUDIENCE: THE CODE OF THE WESTERN*

by Mary Tepper

After the American Civil War ended, a dearth of sensational news led to a slump in newspaper and magazine readership. Editors looked to the Western frontiers of Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska for copy. By the late 1860s the media seized on the exploits of gunfighter Wild Bill Hickok, Army scout Buffalo Bill Cody, and bank robbers Frank and Jesse James. Circulation boomed. Outlaw and lawman melodramas, vaudeville acts, dime novels and personal appearances followed. Cody cobbled together historical characters and dramatic license to create the arena pageant, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders. The show was an enormous hit in America and Europe, touring through the turn of the 20th century. Nascent movie studios incorporated and expanded the Western mythos for an even wider audience. And then came television. In *Target Audience: The Code of the Western*, (opening at La MaMa’s Club September 18th) playwright Jim Neu traces the arc of these early celebrity inventions from the actual events to what became the serial sagas of the James Gang, Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and their Hollywood progeny. *Target Audience* shows how these icons continue to shape our lives in ways that are surprising, funny and disturbing.

Target Audience takes place as a special event presented at the Saddleholster Film Festival. Dr. James Thorne has been invited to address an audience of cowboy movie enthusiasts on the topic, “The State of the Western.” Thorne (played by Neu) is a professor of *situology*, a new social science that focuses on “the interface between the factual and the fictional.” Period photographs and video clips from movies and television illustrate Thorne’s lecture like a Saturday matinee PowerPoint presentation. As the talk continues, the professor’s detachment slowly evaporates and the depth of his personal cowboy commitment becomes clear.

How we meld the fictional and the factual is a concept central to Neu’s play, both thematically and textually. He has a satirist’s trenchant wit that, together with a deconstructive language sensibility, cheerfully recombines common phraseology and word usage into familiarly strange dialogue. New meanings emerge from these juxtapositions – think of jazz and you’re halfway there. Neu has an affinity for music integral to his writing.

Born in Brooklyn, Neu began writing for theatre in the 1970s when he was a member of Robert Wilson's Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. After several years touring with Wilson, he moved to California and established with fellow Byrd, SK Dunn, the experimental wing of the Napa Valley Theatre Company. He returned to New York in 1978 and has since written 20 plays and 2 screenplays, while continuing to perform in his own productions and those of colleagues and friends. He has received grants from the NEA, NYFA and NYSCA. Funding from Arts International and ArtsLink made possible the production of his play *Undercurrent Incorporated* at the 2000 Exodos festival in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Neu enjoys collaborating with a core group of theatre artists, including director Keith McDermott, downtown acting legends Black-Eyed Susan, Bill Rice and Mary Shultz, award-winning designers Carol Mullins, Donald Eastman and David Fritz, musicians/composers Neal Kirkwood and Harry Mann. Ellen Stewart of La MaMa E.T.C. has consistently supported Neu's work, most recently presenting *Kiss Shot* in the spring of 2002. *Kiss Shot* was a humorous *noir* world of hustlers, hipsters, movie extras, satellite-linked musical gizmos and a large ensemble cast. Neu wrote *Target Audience* as a one-man show, with appearances by Deborah Auer, Bill Rice and many booted ghosts. Original songs, with lyrics by Neu and music by Harry Mann, are duets for Thorne and his singing cowgirl/research assistant Ashley Nevada, played by Auer.

If you ever loved cowboy stories, or wondered why the Western movie genre was so popular (and, as a consequence, certain contemporary politicians so successful), mosey on downtown to *Target Audience: The Code of the Western*. Jim Neu serves up a tasty analysis with all the post-modern fixins' – bells and whistles on wry.

Mary Tepper is a recent graduate in theatre from the City University of New York and a recipient of the 2002 Louis Rivers Playwriting Award.

Target Audience: The Code of the Western runs September 18th – 28th, Thursdays through Saturdays at 10:00 P.M., Sundays at 5:00 P.M. at The Club, La MaMa E.T.C., 74 E. 4th Street. Call (212) 475-7710 for reservations.