WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Rainmaker

BY N. RICHARD NASH
DIRECTED BY MARK RUCKER
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
OCTOBER 25–NOVEMBER 25, 2007

WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY
ELIZABETH BRODERSEN
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
MICHAEL PALLER
RESIDENT DRAMATURG
MARGOT MELCON
PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY ASSOCIATE
ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON
PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY INTERN

Words on Plays is made possible in part by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

A.C.T. is supported in part by the Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art, and the donors of The Next Generation Campaign.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of The Rainmaker

7. The Rainmaker Design Presentation

11. “A Valentine to a Sweeter Time”  
   *by Ariel Franklin-Hudson*

17. How It Rains in The Rainmaker at the American Conservatory Theater

18. “It’s a Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”  
   *by Ariel Franklin-Hudson*

22. About the Playwright

24. Foreword to The Rainmaker  
   *by N. Richard Nash*

26. “A Simple Story about Faith”  
   *by Michael Paller*

29. A Short History of Pluviculture in the American West  
   *by Martin Schwartz*

34. Questions to Consider

35. For Further Information . . .
Starbuck, by costume designer Lydia Tanji
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

THE RAINMAKER
The original Broadway production of The Rainmaker opened at the Cort Theatre on October 28, 1954.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

H.C. CURRY
NOAH CURRY
JIM CURRY
LIZZIE CURRY
FILE
SHERIFF THOMAS
BILL STARBUCK

Jack Willis
Stephen Barker Turner
Alex Morf
René Augesen
Anthony Fusco
Rod Gnapp
Geordie Johnson

THE SETTING
The play takes place in a western state on a summer day in a time of drought.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I. The Curry house, morning. H.C. is making breakfast when his oldest son, Noah, comes into the house. Noah is disappointed to see his father—instead of his sister, Lizzie—cooking, but h.c. says that Lizzie is tired and they should let her sleep. She returned late the night before from a trip to visit relatives in Sweetriver. Noah fusses with the radio, hoping to hear something about the drought through which they are suffering. It has been so hot and dry for so long that their cattle are dying and Noah has had to let their ranch hands go.

Jim comes racing in, energetic and agitated. Noah berates him for paying too much attention to “a certain girl named Snookie” at a dance the previous night. Noah is concerned that if Jim continues to “carry on” with Snookie, she will “hog-tie” him into marrying her. Jim, however, hopes that Snookie will give him her little red hat—a hat she always wears, but plans one day to give to some “handsome fella.”

The three Curry men wonder what to do about Lizzie. Jim says they should at least talk to her, but h.c. disagrees: “I can’t just speak up and say: ‘Lizzie, you gotta get married!’ She knows she’s gotta get married. We all know it.”
Lizzie comes downstairs, and h.c. asks about her trip. Lizzie demands that they not beat around the bush: she knows the trip was an attempt to marry her off to one of her cousins. The entire experience was humiliating, because the family knew why she was there and she felt like a horse up for auction. “You’re afraid of bein’ beautiful,” h.c. accuses, but Lizzie declares that she’s afraid to think she’s beautiful when she knows she’s not.

The Curry men hatch a plan to invite the Sheriff’s deputy, File, to dinner. At first, Lizzie protests—she doesn’t want her family to “lasso a husband” for her—but she eventually surrenders, and the Curry men set off for town.

File’s office. File and the Sheriff are in the midst of a friendly argument: the Sheriff wants to give File a dog—he doesn’t think it’s right for File to live alone—but File stubbornly refuses. The Sheriff leaves and the Curry men arrive; they invite him to supper, but, seeing through their plot, File resists. He agrees to come “one of these days,” but not tonight, as there’s an outlaw named Tornado Johnson coming their way. Jim is frustrated by File’s refusal. Giving up the pretense, File says that he wants to be friendly, but he doesn’t want to be married. Jim, angry and embarrassed, starts a fistfight that File quickly wins, leaving Jim with a black eye.

Noah and Jim leave, but h.c. stays behind to tell File that he knows File’s secret: File is not a widower, as he claims to be, but a divorced man whose wife ran out on him. h.c. says that Lizzie could be good for File, but File grows defensive and h.c. leaves him to his solitude.

The Curry house, afternoon. Lizzie, excited by File’s supposedly imminent arrival, makes final adjustments to supper preparations. Noah comes in, but she darts away to change her dress before he can work up the nerve
to tell her of their failure. Jim enters as the phone rings: it’s Snookie, who wants Jim to come for a ride in her car. Noah orders Jim to stay home; Jim is upset.

Lizzie returns, all dressed up, and h.c. breaks the news that File is not coming. Lizzie attempts to hide her disappointment. Noah wonders why Lizzie must be married at all—after all, she has everything she needs in her father and brothers and their home. h.c. disagrees, asserting that she won’t be happy until she marries. Jim declares that Lizzie will never get married unless she learns to flirt like flibbertigibbets like Lily Ann Beasley, but Lizzie doesn’t want a man who succumbs to inane girlish airs. She wants a man “to stand up straight,” and she wants “to stand up straight to him.”

Suddenly, the door swings open to reveal a stranger on the threshold. “The name is Starbuck—Rainmaker!” he announces; for one hundred dollars paid in advance he promises to bring rain within 24 hours. Noah and Lizzie are extremely skeptical, but h.c. decides to take the offer. When Lizzie scoffs at her father’s reasoning, Starbuck declares: “You gotta take my deal because once in your life you gotta take a chance on a con man! . . . [A] hundred bucks is only a hundred bucks—but rain in a dry season is a sight to behold!” They all sit down to supper.

ACT II. The Curry house, evening. A resistant Noah counts out Starbuck’s hundred dollars. Lizzie and Noah are angry with h.c. for letting himself be conned. Jim and h.c., however, readily take on the bizarre tasks Starbuck gives them to help bring rain: Jim goes outside to beat Starbuck’s big bass drum, and h.c. takes Starbuck’s “special” paint and paints a big white arrow pointing away from the house. Even Noah leaves, in a huff, to tie the mule’s hind legs together.

File, by costume designer Lydia Tanji
Left alone with Starbuck, Lizzie rages: “You’re not satisfied to steal our money! You have to make jackasses out of us!” Starbuck attempts to defend himself, but she will have none of his stories. He, in turn, sees right to the heart of her insecurities: “You don’t believe in nothin’—not even in yourself. You don’t even believe you’re a woman. And if you don’t—you’re not!” Leaving her deeply perturbed, he exits.

*File’s office, night.* File lies on the couch in his office, which is also his home, unhappy and uncomfortable. The Sheriff enters and asks File about the visit from the Curry men. File brushes him off; he has changed his mind about the dog, he says, but the Sheriff has already given the dog away. The Sheriff sees through File’s change of heart, and urges him to go see Lizzie. File agrees to take an hour off.

*The Curry house. h.c.* covered in paint, comes into the house. He is followed by a limping Noah, much the worse for the discourteous treatment he has had from the recalcitrant mule. They discuss their respective woes until Jim comes in, carrying the bass drum. He describes how Starbuck listens to him and takes him seriously. He gets a blanket out of Lizzie’s linen chest so that Starbuck can bed down in the tack room.

Lizzie comes back downstairs. It is too hot—and Jim’s drum is too loud—for her to sleep. The phone rings; it is Snookie for Jim, again, but Noah hangs up on her. Starbuck encourages Jim to call her right back, but Lizzie demands that he not interfere with their family. Starbuck returns to the tack room, Jim flees upstairs, and Noah storms out.

Still in anguish over Starbuck’s accusation, Lizzie says that she would be better off like Lily Ann Beasley, the empty-headed flirt. She begins to imitate Lily Ann’s absurd flirtation. File appears in the doorway during her improvisation, unnoticed by Lizzie and h.c. He finally announces his presence, and Lizzie is mortified.

File claims that he has come to apologize to Jim. h.c. goes upstairs to fetch Jim, unsubtly leaving Lizzie and File alone together. Painfully embarrassed, they exchange awkward pleasantries until Jim comes downstairs and File can make his apology. Jim, pleased by File’s unexpected appearance, exuberantly beats the drum and races out of the room. Again alone with Lizzie, File admits that he lied about his reason for visiting: he really came to tell Lizzie the truth about his divorce. They begin to open up to each other; he tells her that his wife left him because his pride prevented him from asking her to stay. Lizzie, far too candid, calls him a fool for letting her go. He becomes angry, and she desperately attempts to fix things by flirting like Lily Ann Beasley. Appalled by her act, File leaves.

Lizzie’s family rushes in, asking what happened. When Lizzie explains, Noah lashes out at h.c., blaming his father for Lizzie’s plight. “You’ve been building up a rosy dream for her,” he says, “[but] she’s gotta face the facts. . . . She’s plain.” Jim launches himself at
Noah in a fury. Starbuck, who has been watching from the sidelines, breaks up the fight. Jim runs out of the house. Noah orders Starbuck to clear out, but Starbuck refuses. “And while I’m here, you’re gonna quit callin’ that kid a dumbbell—because he’s not. . . . And . . . don’t you ever call her plain,” Starbuck says and goes out after Jim. Noah, however, does not back down: “You’re gonna be an old maid. And the sooner you face it, the sooner you’ll stop breakin’ your heart,” he tells Lizzie and goes upstairs. H.c. advises Lizzie to ignore Noah, but Lizzie is certain that her brother is right; devastated, she snatches up the bed linens Jim took out for Starbuck and races outside.

The tack room. Starbuck is undressing for bed when Lizzie enters, carrying the bed linens. She has come to thank him for his defense of Jim, although she does not believe what he said about her—she believes she truly is plain. Starbuck encourages her to dream big dreams, but Lizzie explains that, while her dreams may be smaller and quieter than his, they are still dreams. Certain that her dreams will never come true, she breaks down, and Starbuck comforts her, telling her to believe in herself. “There’s no such thing as a plain woman,” he says, encouraging her to see herself through her own eyes, and not as she fears others see her; he takes the pins out of her hair and insists that she recognize her own beauty. When she finally does, he kisses her.

Act III. The Curry house, around 2 a.m. H.c. is on the phone, trying to track down Jim, who has disappeared. Noah comes downstairs, unable to sleep. Jim returns, self-satisfied and confident; he has been out with Snookie and has her little red hat to show for it—they are engaged. Jim wants to tell Lizzie his news, but H.c. explains that Lizzie is out in the tack room with Starbuck.
Suddenly, File and the Sheriff appear seeking Starbuck, who is also known as Tornado Johnson and wanted in several states for swindling the populace.

h.c. and Jim deny any knowledge of Tornado Johnson, but the Sheriff and File see through their inexpert lies and go outside to investigate Starbuck’s wagon of supplies. Noah prepares to bring Starbuck in himself, but h.c. stops him: “Lizzie has got to have somethin’. Even if it’s only one minute.”

The tack room. Starbuck and Lizzie sit in the early morning light, intimate. Starbuck demands that Lizzie never forget that she is beautiful, even after he leaves. He is moved by their momentary romance and tells her the truth: “I never made rain in my life!” “It’s not good to live in your dreams,” Lizzie counsels, but Starbuck notes that it’s not good to live outside them, either. He offers to stick around for a while—not for good, but for a few days—and Lizzie is overjoyed.

The Curry house. Lizzie returns from the tack room and joyfully tells her family that she has a beau. h.c. informs her that File and the Sheriff are there to arrest him, and Lizzie is about to run out to warn Starbuck when File and Jim come into the house. File demands that h.c. tell him where Starbuck is; when h.c. lies again, File begins to suspect that something is going on between Lizzie and the fugitive. Starbuck comes into the house, singing too loudly to hear Lizzie yelling at him to run. File arrests Starbuck; Lizzie begs File to let him get away. h.c., Jim, and even Noah defend Starbuck’s character, and File reluctantly lets Starbuck go. On his way out the door, Starbuck asks Lizzie to come with him. She hesitates, considering, until File begs her not to go—the one thing he could never bring himself to ask the wife who left him. Lizzie chooses File—and her small, quiet dreams—and Starbuck leaves. There is a rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning; it rains.
THE RAINMAKER DESIGN PRESENTATION
Excerpts from Remarks Made to A.C.T. Cast and Staff September 24, 2007

DIRECTOR MARK RUCKER: The timing of this piece, for me personally, couldn’t be more interesting. It only occurred to me very recently how long I have been carrying around this story. From the time I was about seven years old until maybe around twelve, I was obsessed with Katharine Hepburn. I would pore over the TV Guide, mark when her movies were playing, and set my alarm clock and get up at four o’clock in the morning to watch a movie of hers. Of course, one of those mornings, or late evenings, was The Rainmaker. I was absolutely captivated by it. There are three movies of hers in particular that I was really struck by: The Rainmaker, a movie called Desk Set, and the one set in Venice, the David Lean movie . . . Summertime.

For some reason these movies really spoke to me, at eight, nine years old. They’re all movies about women who are a little bit older than . . . whatever [laughter], who have made lives for themselves but have possibly missed their chance for love. How the hell does that speak to an eight-year-old boy from Orange County? I have no idea, but it did. And it freaks me out a little bit to think that decisions like that, at that age, could possibly lead to my sitting in this room with you now. It’s fascinating. And as I watch my six-year-old nephew, I’m wondering what choices he’s making that are going to lead him to his future. It boggles my mind and I don’t know what to think about it. And part of the play that speaks to me is about parenting decisions—how much is too much and how much is not enough, and balancing. Balancing is a thing I’ve been thinking about as I worked on the play.

My next encounter with this story was I think in my freshman or sophomore year of high school, when in drama class my favorite scene partner, Pam Franklin, and I—after having conquered George and Martha [laughter]—determined that our next scene would be Lizzie and Starbuck. So a 15-year-old, skinny, kind of effeminate boy took on the role of Starbuck. I’d like to say that I took away something amazing from that, but I just felt completely inept at the end of it. In thinking about it now, however, I realize that I didn’t understand; I was working so hard at the bravado that I didn’t understand the vulnerability there. I didn’t understand how close, or in a similar place, the two characters in that scene really are.

In looking at the play in the last couple of months I’ve come to be enamored of all of the characters in the play, to appreciate how all of them are in a particular place at this particular moment, a place that, I’m thinking about now, is one of a kind of balancing of
self. Whether it means self-worth or self-esteem or confidence, or whatever the words are that we might choose, or you might use individually to think about it, I find it fascinating that I've come to a place with each and every one of the characters where I'm thinking about these things. And thinking about how each of them is struggling in his or her own way with a sense of self. I love that about the play. And I realize that that's something that probably struck me as an eight-year-old boy, something that I've been struggling with, and looking at, and wondering about, up until last night at midnight. Not that I finished last night . . . [laughter]

The thing that's interesting about balancing—I'm going to overuse that word today—is that it's something we went through in working on the play, the designers and [dramaturg] Michael [Paller] and I. When we started to have discussions about the play, we found that the first question we had to answer was: Where are we? The script doesn't tell us literally where the action takes place. We began to understand that it's not necessarily a literal place. I don't know that that means it's not a real place, because I think it has to be a real place. But I looked at every town that is listed in the play and thought for a minute that we were in Texas, because there is a Four Corners in Texas, but none of the other towns [mentioned in the script] were there. And then I tried Kansas and New Mexico and Colorado and Nebraska and I didn't find the place.

What's interesting is that the play gives us specific towns that are meant to have a specific quality. There is so much in the play that is real and specific and literal—frying eggs, for example—and then as you step back farther there are these other aspects, there is a spectrum that leads us all the way to a fantastic yellow sky. Or something beautiful and romantic and poetic. So for us, it's been a bit of a journey trying to figure out how to embody these qualities of the play.

I also immediately assumed that, because the play was written in 1953–54 and the script doesn't tell us that it is set in a specific time or another era, the action takes place in 1953–54. I think it was [costume designer] Lydia [Tanji] and Michael, following that, who brought up some evidence about things mentioned in the script—the radio crystal set, the telephone, Snookie's car—which we researched, and we realized that Nash is telling us the play does not in fact take place in the time that it was written, even though other productions have sometimes set it in the fifties.

So, we found our way to a different place, following the evidence. However, I still feel it's a literal place, which we've decided to land in the very early 1930s, because of the time of drought. But because there is no reference to Depression problems, or to financial problems unrelated to the drought, the setting still feels nonliteral in that sense. It's been fascinating trying to land, and not land. I want to leave room for us to make some decisions [in
rehearsal], as well, for me to learn from you about what the play is. I am also excited about doing what does, in some ways, feel like a realistic play. [Scenic designer] Rob [Morgan] and I worked hard to try to get, believe it or not, a three-walled set for this, which is very traditional and, at this point, I think, kind of refreshing for us to see, especially at a.c.t., which tends to do plays that have metaphor and ideas and trail-blazing visuals. Maybe we can do that, too, and have the visuals and a kind of edge about it, as well.

**SCENIC DESIGNER ROB MORGAN:** [Morgan’s remarks accompanied a slideshow of visual images: photographs of paintings, set models and drawings, interiors and exteriors of ranches and farmhouses, etc.] As Mark said, we started meeting around May or June and started talking about where we are, again trying to figure out where this is. I just want to go over some of the visual research that seemed to bubble to the top in terms of this play. Some of the work of Andrew Wyeth, Thomas Hart Benton, obviously. An influence on costumes was artist Grant Wood, whose work is a lot like Thomas Hart Benton’s, in a sense—real classic environments, classic rolling hills, classic farm architecture. Some farmhouse interiors, things that seemed to resonate as we were tossing images back and forth via email. Mark and I talked about whether any of these images would stick, kind of like throwing pasta at a wall: What’s going to stick in terms of this show? A couple of them were these really vibrant color interiors. At one point Mark wrote me and said this play is a “valentine to a sweeter time,” and those words really resonated with me in terms of a visual way to go with this. So there are some classic exteriors, a windmill. From there we went to a very rough white model. [Lighting designer] Don [Darnutzer] then would take a photo I emailed to him [of the set model] and change the background, change the sky, so we could bounce ideas off of Mark to give him an idea of what sunsets looked like, what the Curry kitchen looks like during the day, what the set in a night scene might look like, some of the color.

We have three basic looks: the Curry house, File’s office, and the tack room. The tack room has to be a very magical place for us. It has to be the place where Lizzie and Starbuck really fall in love. It has to have that magical quality to it.

**COSTUME DESIGNER LYDIA TANJI:** In my research we found that the middle class didn’t really feel the Depression until the mid 1930s. We chose 1930–32 for Lizzie’s looks, and her clothes are mainly new because of her Sweeetrivor visit. The first look is in the kitchen at home, which is more practical and streamlined. For the dinner scene, it’s more flowy, and she feels a little ridiculous afterward when File doesn’t show. Starbuck has a little showmanship, and we also wanted to differentiate the cattlemen from the farmers, so we went with a more western look. He has some Native American accents. The Sheriff is cozy, and
File, in his first look, is much more untogther, and then he makes an effort when he goes to see Lizzie. Jimmy has an elk-tooth necklace that is gone after he gets Snookie’s hat. Noah is more studious and uptight. With h.c., we’re just having fun.

**Sound Designer Jeff Mockus:** We originally talked about the late 1920s, but since we shifted to the early thirties I’m very pleased, because it opens up a few more possibilities, musically. What I’ve been searching for is a precursor to country, like western swing, but isn’t hillbilly music. Not like the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack, which is a great example of stuff that came out of Alabama, which is east of all of this. I’m just trying to find something that’s going to speak to a western state a little more. Music on the radio at that time was almost all live, and we’ve got these archival recordings. Either they were at a dance and they’d hear a territory band that just plays the area, or in the bigger towns they would see the Chicago, New York, and New Orleans acts that would tour around the entire country. There was a great band called the Light Crust Dough Boys, which was very common—they would put together a band that would promote a product, so, “Light Crust Dough.”
A “VALENTINE TO A SWEETER TIME”
A Conversation with Rainmaker Scenic Designer Robert Mark Morgan

BY ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON

The setting of The Rainmaker—described simply by playwright N. Richard Nash as “a western state on a summer day in a time of drought”—presents a particular challenge to a scenic designer. The details of The Rainmaker’s locale, as described in the text, are realistic and specific, invoking daily life on a struggling ranch in the American West of the early 1930s. At the same time, the play explores certain ineffable qualities of hope and faith that transcend conventionally naturalistic representations of time and place.

Rainmaker scenic designer Robert Mark Morgan—whose work is especially notable for his imaginative ability to draw out the romantic essence of traditionally realistic, classic American plays—spoke to us about his design process and the difficulties and rewards of visually addressing both the historical realism and the emotional universality of The Rainmaker.

ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON: HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE DESIGN FOR THIS PLAY?

ROBERT MARK MORGAN: As always, approaching a design begins with the director. In this case, [director] Mark Rucker and I sat down to discuss the play and look over some preliminary research about six months ago. Upon my first reading of [The Rainmaker], I was struck by the following quote, part of the foreword in the [Random House] version of the script: “[The Curry house] is a place where beauty is made out of affection and all manner of gentleness. The tack room, if seen realistically, might be a dustbin attractive only to the termites and rodents of the night. But if the designer sees it romantically—as Lizzie might see it, with all its memorabilia of childhood—it will tell the hopeful promise intended. Or File’s office—it is not an office, really . . . it is File’s secret hiding place from the world, the island where he errantly believes he can bring balm to his loneliness.”

I also chart the play to get a sense of where we are and when—a way of viewing the play at a glance. Seeing the play as a whole like this helps me to get a sense of the challenges involved, as well as seeing what might be similar about dissimilar locations to get a kind of “essence.”
WHAT IS YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS?
For me, images and research are a way to come up with a “visual language” that a director and I can agree upon. One director’s idea of what “romantic” looks like might be different from my own. For that reason, I usually have a lot of preliminary research that spans everything from paintings to photography. Later in the process, research is the well that I go to when the rest of the creative team and crew need answers about a specific look, texture, color, etc. A design can be thought of as a series of many, many decisions, and, as the “snowball” of people involved gets larger and larger, the questions get more and more specific: “What type of finish do you want on the desk? What kinds of kitchen utensils is Lizzie using?” etc. The research has, for me, the answers within it—you just have to look closely.

I’M INTERESTED IN THE SPACE OF THE PLAY. DO YOU THINK OF IT AS AN EMOTIONAL SPACE? A REALISTIC SPACE? HOW HAS THIS AFFECTED YOUR DESIGN?
There is an interesting dichotomy about this play and our particular approach to the design for it that’s worth noting. It was written at a time—1954—when naturalism and realism in design was very much the norm, and when designers like Robert Edmund Jones [a
frequent collaborator of Eugene O’Neill] made their mark in the theater design world. For us, there’s a level of that realism that Mark certainly wanted to use; at one point, he even mentioned: “I want Lizzie to be able to fry an egg onstage.” At the same time, we have many more options today than they had in 1954. We have more technology to move scenery, and can have a set where we only see the location we need to see onstage. When we are in the Curry house we cannot see File’s office, because that unit shifts on later. As an audience, we can focus our attention solely on the Curry house without being distracted by other visible locations. This design is, hopefully, a kind of blend of those two worlds. As Mark said, it’s a “valentine to a sweeter time.”

**There is a lot of specificity in the original script as to what the set should look like—I’m thinking in particular of the description of the Curry ranch as “strongly masculine in its basic structure” but showing “Lizzie’s hand in many of its appointments.” How have you addressed these details and reconciled them with your own vision?**

We have used a lot of wood tones in furniture and the like, softened with elements that Lizzie might choose: curtains, doilies, etc. Before she passed away, I heard a brilliant Broadway costume designer, Patricia Zipprodt, speak on a design jury. She was asked a simple question: “How do you go about designing costumes for a contemporary play?” She answered in an equally simple way: “I think about the character, go to their closet, and pick something out.” The same is true for props in *The Rainmaker*. When complete, we hopefully have created an environment that has Lizzie’s hand on it; by association, those items are a nonverbal communication to the audience of what we want to convey about Lizzie.

In addition, however, it was important to Mark that the set have a bit of an old-movie Technicolor quality to it, a crispness and vividness of color that is a nod to the nostalgia we feel towards the time period in which this play was new and life was—seemingly—simpler and people were more “pure” and well-intentioned.

**Could you talk a bit more about your collaboration with Mark Rucker and the rest of the design team?**

Collaborating with Mark has been great. He’s very busy, and in demand by multiple arts organizations, but those organizations have luckily been local during the design process for *The Rainmaker*. I’ve met with Mark at a number of interesting places: my studio, the picnic tables adjacent to [the California Shakespeare Festival] in Orinda, onstage at
[A.C.T.], and in the lobby of the Magic Theatre, where Mark was directing a new Joan Rivers theater piece.

As for the rest of the design team, I’ve designed three shows with Don Darnutzer, our Minneapolis-based lighting designer. He lit *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and created some of the most breathtaking skies I have ever seen onstage. I’ve also collaborated before with our sound designer, Jeff Mockus, on a production of *Major Barbara* at San Jose Rep in 2004. He’s brilliant as well, and his sound is important for creating the mood we need, as well as for carrying us from one location to another. I’ve also had great fun getting to know our costume designer, Lydia Tanji. Her costumes are going to be lovely and delicate—the costume design equivalent of the “sweet valentine” that Mark mentioned.

**WHAT IS THE MOST INTERESTING FEATURE OF THIS SET, FOR YOU?**
Perhaps what is most interesting for me is what is not there—namely: the light and sky. Having lit and photographed the model myself and knowing Don’s talents, I’m very interested to see how light transforms this set. After all, the sky is such a dominant element to the western setting where this play takes place. There’s a lot about scenic and lighting departments collaborating and communicating that is important to gain that feeling of a parched, drought-ridden landscape.

**ARE THERE ANY ARTISTS THAT HAVE INFLUENCED YOUR DESIGN?**
It really wasn’t Mark’s desire to go much into the realm of artistic gestures—a la the design for *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. He wanted a classic and real environment, with some liberties taken on the edges. [Andrew] Wyeth was important, however, in his simplicity and his focus on skies. Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, in particular, could be Lizzie herself on the hillside. The inspiration seems, again, to stress the importance of sky as a means of placing us in a time and place. We should get a sense that we’re in a dry and wide-open space that is strangely confining for Lizzie’s character. In my view, she has so much room to run, and yet can’t.

**YOU HAVE DESIGNED FOR A.C.T. IN THE PAST, FOR A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN AND THE DAZZLE, BUT YOU’RE STILL RELATIVELY NEW TO THE A.C.T. STAGE. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO DESIGN FOR OUR THEATER?**
Designing for A.C.T. is always a real pleasure, as the artists and scenic talents on staff are among the best I’ve ever seen. To visit the shop, and see how the shop has built and painted things beyond even my best expectation, is a real thrill for me. What makes designing for theater addictive is that I’m consistently amazed by the talents of others who can do things
I cannot—whether that be acting, dancing, or singing—and I often gawk in amazement and consider myself one of the lucky ones in life to have such a “front row seat” to those talents. From the scenic standpoint, I am equally amazed by the talents of the A.C.T. staff to create the environments I have only dreamed up and placed on paper. They meet the challenges and rise to the occasion without fail.

LET’S TALK ABOUT THE RAIN. WHAT CONSIDERATIONS MUST YOU HAVE AS A DESIGNER WHEN THERE IS GOING TO BE A RAIN EFFECT ONSTAGE? HOW HAVE YOU INTEGRATED THE RAIN INTO YOUR DESIGN?

There has been a lot of effort directed towards solving the technical and logistical problems that bringing water onstage creates. I have solicited advice from friends and colleagues who I know have done rain onstage before—and with a lot of success. Tests and demonstrations are being done at the A.C.T. scene shop. We also have to tackle issues and concerns that span departments, such as: Do actors get wet—in wigs, no less? How do we keep the grand drape and other lighting instruments dry? How and to where is the rain drained off? etc.
WHY DO WE NEED TO SEE THE RAIN? WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE RAINMAKER— AND THIS PRODUCTION OF THE RAINMAKER—that requires such a major effect? Since the script does not explicitly call for rain onstage, what drove this artistic decision?

Rain has been in the forefront of Mark’s vision for this particular production from the earliest discussions. Rain happens at the end of the play and should be a bit of a surprise for the audience, but also a surprise to Starbuck and Lizzie. It is a reward, of sorts, for their willingness to “take a chance” on their dreams. Their willingness to believe that magic can, at times, really happen in the setting we occupy in real life.

Robert Mark Morgan’s recent projects include scenic designs at UC Berkeley, Indiana University, American Players Theater, San Jose Repertory Theatre, the Denver Center Theatre Company, and San Francisco’s Magic Theatre. A.C.T. audiences may remember his beautiful and evocative sets for The Dazzle (2003) and A Moon for the Misbegotten (2005). The set for A Moon for the Misbegotten—described by the San Francisco Bay Guardian as “a rapturously ramshackle affair” in which Morgan “brings out thoroughly [the elements of a dream play]”—was selected for display in the U.S. exhibit at the 2007 Prague Design Quadrennial.
HOW IT RAINS IN *THE RAINMAKER* AT THE AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

1. There are copper water pipes built in to the stage walls and fitted with spigots, which bring in water from the outside. A hose connects those pipes to both ends of a 24-foot pipe, installed for *The Rainmaker*, that runs across the stage, up high and near the front of the stage.

2. The water flows, from both ends, first into an inside pipe, about one and a half to two inches in diameter, which has little holes in it all the way across, like an irrigation drip system. That pipe is inside another larger pipe, about three or four inches in diameter, which has an open slit in one side of it. To begin with, the slit is rotated up, at about two or three o’clock.

3. On cue, the water is turned on. It first fills the entire length of the inside pipe and then flows (“rains”) into the outside pipe. A split second later, the outside pipe is rotated so the slit turns down to six o’clock, allowing the “rain” to fall straight down onto the stage, about 24 to 30 feet below. The delay created by the double pipe system allows the water to flow freely and simultaneously across the full length of the stage.

4. A trough to catch the falling water has been built into the stage floor, 24 feet long and 16 inches wide. The trough is attached to the stage floor from underneath and is covered by a steel grating and a wood covering painted to match the set. Because it is located beneath the scenic pieces that represent the Curry house, the audience can’t see the trough at all during the scenes that take place in the Curry house. During the second intermission of the play, the wood covers are pulled off of the trough to prepare for the rain effect. The trough is ultimately revealed when the Curry house scenic elements move offstage at the end of Act III.

5. The falling water is caught in the trough, which is lined with foam padding to reduce the amount of splatter and noise. From the trough, the water drains into hoses that join together in one big hose, which empties into a drain in the trap room beneath the stage.

6. To stop the rain, the source of water is turned off and the outer pipe is rotated back up to two or three o’clock.
“IT’S A HARD RAIN’S A-GONNA FALL”
A Conversation with A.C.T. Scene Shop Foreman Mark Luevano

BY ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON

Originally, there was no rain in *The Rainmaker*. The story goes that, when the play opened out of town before premiering on Broadway in 1954, it ended with Starbuck’s exit. Before the show opened in New York, however, N. Richard Nash’s son reportedly pointed out to his father the absence of actual precipitation. Realizing that his play lacked a cathartic ending, Nash added a storm, which took place offstage. In fact, the published script still calls only for sound and lighting effects—thunder and lightning—followed by Starbuck’s euphoric pronouncement: “Rain, folks—it’s gonna rain! . . . for the first time in my life—rain!” Rain remained largely an offstage effect in subsequent major productions of the play until Roundabout Theater Company’s 1999 Broadway revival. (It is, however, a prominent feature of the film version of the play and of Nash’s musical adaptation, *110 in the Shade*).

Real rain was always part of director Mark Rucker’s vision for the A.C.T. production. But it’s one thing to want a rain effect, and another thing entirely to make it happen onstage. The technical mastermind behind A.C.T.’s *Rainmaker* downpour is Scene Shop Foreman Mark Luevano. Luevano, already busy building the set and designing the rain effect, spoke to us as *Rainmaker* rehearsals began.

**ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON: HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT PLANNING AN EFFECT LIKE THE RAIN IN *THE RAINMAKER*?**

**MARK LUEVANO:** They’ve had enough rain effects here [in the American Conservatory Theater] over the years that you have a backlog of “how we did it that time.” Or you talk to your other theater buddies. There is a sort of catalogue—or bag of tricks—to pull from. But each time is specific; each set is its own unique sculpture, its own entity, and you don’t want to just pull out the same old thing. One of the last rain effects we did here, for [David Mamet’s *American Buffalo*], they had to have rain against the windows for the entire show. It’s a very different thing technically to have rain continuously for two hours, than to have a downpour for the moment that we’re going to have it [in *The Rainmaker*].

I’ve shown [scenic designer] Rob [Morgan] three different takes on how we propose to do the rain. One is the standard old pvc tube, where you drill a bunch of holes in the tube and let [the water] come down. To my mind that’s very much like a showerhead. It looks

---

more like a curtain of water, and much less like rain. We’re trying to make our rain look like drops, and keep it contained within a very narrow space. I think we’ve got something by using some pretty standard irrigation products, instead of doing the manual labor of drilling all the holes in PVC pipe. The irrigation hose is quickly adaptable; you can punch holes in it, or stop them up with simple heads. With PVC pipe, we’d have to take it back to the shop to make any modifications.

The disadvantage of the irrigation tubes is that they have a wide spray pattern—they’re meant to irrigate large areas. One of the films I worked on—I had to build a giant thatched roof for Memoirs of a Geisha—I noticed that rain comes off a thatched hut in drops, and it’s really a nice effect. We thought we could use that to try to bring the rain in The Rainmaker into a very tightly controlled area: drop the thatch over both sides of the pipe, and then cover it with another waterproof membrane. I’ve combined this primitive method—the thatch—with high-tech black pond liner membrane that’ll go the length of the stage and control the water. The problem with having just the membrane is that I don’t want the rain to end up being a river of water. I want it, again, to have drops.

I read something about having the holes point up so that the droplets of water would drip down around the pipe. It comes down to surface tension: how long each thing will hold a small amount of water before it lets it drop. That’s what made me think of thatch again: we were sitting there in the rain waiting to finish building the hut, saying, “Wow, it’s amazing, it collects all the water and you can see where it’s coming down in drops, not in streams, and it must have a certain amount of surface tension to hold the drops.” So, I thought, rather than trying to fake something like that, we’d find out how much it costs and see if we could incorporate it. We might have a really good Tiki Room after this.

How much does the rain effect add to the budget?
It accounts for about 12.3 percent of my overall budget, which may not seem like a lot, but [the rain effect] involves every department. Props and wigs and costumes and make-up, everybody is directly involved, asking, “How is this going to work, and when it works, what happens afterwards?” It comes down less to money, per se, as much as time and effort. Because you really can’t fly by the seat of your pants with water onstage.

Where will the water come from?
I mentioned to [former A.C.T. Technical Director] Ed Raymond, who helped design the theater [for the post–Loma Prieta earthquake renovation], that I had noticed copper
pipes on the stage, which were stopped up. He said, “You can't believe how hard I fought to get copper onstage for just what you're doing, for rain effects.” There are so many fire controls—the front curtain, the doors here and the doors there—that you can’t just pipe in water from offstage. There’s an element of safety to doing [a rain effect]: it needs to be contained completely within the stage environment.

**THE COPPER PIPES ARE ALREADY THERE?**
They are already there. I need to make sure that I can provide as much or as little rain as [director Mark Rucker] wants. We did a mockup of the rain bar, which is about 12 feet above the stage. A lot of this is conjecture, speculating that it’s going to be up that high there and falling this wide here, until we actually try it out in technical rehearsals. The other reason I wanted to stick to these irrigation tubes is that I can calculate how many gallons per minute are coming out of the sky.

But the biggest challenge isn’t making rain, it’s getting rid of rain. However much volume [the director] wants during that moment, we need to come up with a way to get rid of it. We also need to make sure we can have water from each side—in case the director wants a complete deluge—and a controllable system. And when it rains, it rains, and it looks however it looks, but then people are taking curtain calls, and bowing, and the audience is leaving, and it’s still kind of dripping. So being able to shut off the rain is important, too.

**I TALKED TO A.C.T. HEAD CARPENTER MIGUEL ONGPIN, WHO SAID THAT THE DRAINAGE WOULD GO DOWN INTO A 16-INCH-WIDE TROUGH IN THE TRAP ROOM BELOW THE STAGE.**
Down in the basement, yes. It will run off through a drain in the floor.

**HE ALSO SAID, “RAIN SUCKS,” WHICH SEEMS APT.**
Obviously it’s problematic. We’re going to have 40 or 50 gallons of water per minute coming out in this one area. If it drips or leaks, it’s a mess on the stage. You get into practical concerns: if it rains on a set or on the costumes, what do you do on a two-show day? You have to double up everything, which means that you double your budget for costumes, wigs, make-up, everything, for the run of the show. If the expensive black cloth goods get wet, then they get ruined, moldy, and that’s no good. We have to protect all the electrical lighting and sound equipment. And we don't want [the rain system] to be seen, so we have to tuck it up behind everything. There are a lot of things going on in a very small space. So we confined the rain to right underneath the platform [on which the set for the Curry house sits].
The big issue with the drainage in this show, in particular, is that the stage is bare, on
and off, during the show, so the audience would see an open grate. We don't want to give
away the effect. I think it's very important to the director that there not be this sort of
prescient knowledge that the rain is coming no matter what. The Curry house platform
also has to roll, and wheels can't roll over an exposed drain.

**SO THE HOUSE GOES AWAY BEFORE IT STARTS RAINING?**
Yes, it will rain on an empty stage. There’ll be a reveal moment where the house goes away,
and that’s the end of the play. The rain and the windmill in the background—Rob Morgan
wants the windmill blades to move as if the wind's kicking in: here comes the storm, and
then the rain starts. It gets its own moment.

**WHY ARE WE MAKING IT RAIN?**
Well, I get to play the technical director on this one, not the director, so I don't really
know. The play's called *The Rainmaker*, I know that a lot of productions don't do [the rain].
I've heard from several people, “Oh, you have to do it, because it’s symbolic of Lizzie’s
womanhood coming into flower,” and whatever. But for us it's great. It’s a challenge, it’s
fun, it's what we like to do. Everybody around here grimaces because we have to deal with
the nuts and bolts of it, but it’s fun to do something that’s so dramatic. And when it gets
its own moment like that at the end of the play, it's something everybody applauds—if it
goes right—and we get to say, "I had a hand in that, that’s my work. “

**YOUR MOMENT.**
Yes. But of course, if it doesn’t look good, then we’re the goats for another season. And
next year we’ll have to hear someone say, “Just make sure it's not like that rain in *The
Rainmaker.*”

**WELL, I’M EXCITED TO SEE IT.**
Me, too!

Before joining A.C.T. in 2006, Mark Luevano worked on such films as *Memoirs of a Geisha, RENT,* and *The Pursuit of Happyness.*
As assistant construction coordinator on the television series *Nash Bridges* (1995–2001), his duties included building a floating
police station set on a barge and filming in every restaurant, bar, and back alley of San Francisco. As master carpenter at the
Eureka Theatre, he built sets for the original production of *Angels in America,* he also worked on the A.C.T. production of *Angels
as a scene shop carpenter (1991–93). Luevano has a B.A. in dramatic arts production from UC Berkeley.
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

N. Richard Nash was born in 1913, as Nathaniel Richard Nussbaum, on the rough south side of Philadelphia, the son of Sael L. Nussbaum, a bookbinder, and Jenny Singer Nussbaum. Nash grew up on the streets and first worked as a ten-dollar-a-match boxer. He was also a good student, however, and, after graduating from South Philadelphia High School in 1930, he attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied English and philosophy. He published two books on philosophy after graduating in 1934: *The Athenian Spirit* and *The Wounds of Sparta.*

Nash soon switched to teaching and writing plays. His first, *Parting at Imsdorf* (1940), brought him some immediate success, earning him the Maxwell Anderson Verse Drama Award. His Broadway debut, *The Second Best Bed* (a comedy about Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, which he also directed), opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1946, followed by *The Young and Fair* in 1948. His next play, *See the Jaguar* (James Dean’s Broadway debut, 1952), won the International Drama Award in Cannes and the Prague Award.

Nash’s greatest success and lasting fame were made with *The Rainmaker,* which opened on Broadway on October 28, 1954, starring Geraldine Page in the role of Lizzie Curry and Darren McGavin as Starbuck. Nash originally wrote the play as a television drama for the Philco Playhouse in tribute to his older sister, Mae, whom Nash described as “one of the left-out people.” He credited Mae with curing him of a childhood stutter. “Mae got me into a corner and would say to me, ‘Talk,’” Nash remembered. “She would say, ‘I’m here, I’ll stay here, I won’t rush you, and I won’t leave you. Now talk.’ Her willingness to listen is what saved my life. And this is what this play is about.”

Writing in the *New York Times,* Brooks Atkinson described the play as “warm, simple, and friendly; the humor is captivating, and the characters are lovable and original.” Two years later, the London production, also starring Miss Page (who received nine curtain calls on opening night), charmed British audiences as well as critics; *The Times* of London described the play as “a humorous, tender, and wise little American comedy,” while the *Daily Mail* began its review: “Here is a beautiful little American comedy with a catch in its throat.” *The Rainmaker* became Nash’s signature piece, ensuring his place in American popular culture. Eva Marie Saint, Nancy Marchand, Tuesday Weld, Sally Field, and Jayne Atkinson are among the actors who have played Lizzie in subsequent productions. The script has been translated into 40 languages and was adapted (by Nash) in 1956 into a film starring Katharine Hepburn and Burt Lancaster, as well as a musical, *110 in the Shade,* which ran on Broadway for ten months in 1963 and was revived to acclaim in 2005 with
Audra McDonald singing Lizzie’s role. (Hepburn received an Academy Award nomination for best actress for her performance in the film).

Although Nash could have lived comfortably on the income from *The Rainmaker* for the rest of his life, he continued to work consistently. His subsequent writing for the stage includes *Girls of Summer* (1956), *Handful of Fire* (1958), *Wildcat* (starring Lucille Ball, 1960), *The Happy Time* (with music by John Kander and Fred Ebb; nominated for the Tony Award for best musical in 1968), and *Saravà* (1979). He also wrote extensively for television anthologies, including the U.S. Steel Hour, General Electric Theater, Philco Playhouse, Goodyear Playhouse, and Theater Guild of the Air, as well as 12 episodes of the series *Here Come the Brides* (1968–69). His screenplays for Hollywood include *Welcome Stranger* (a 1947 hit starring Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald), the noir *Nora Prentiss* (one of Warner’s top four money makers of 1947), *The Sainted Sisters* (1948), *Dear Wife* (1949), *Mara Maru* (1952), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Porgy and Bess* (1959), and *Between the Darkness and the Dawn* (1985). He also published a novel, *East Wind, Rain* (about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 1977), and taught in several academic theater departments over the course of his career, including those of Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Yale, Princeton, and Brandeis. Under the pseudonym of John Roc, he wrote a play, *Fire!* (1969), and a novel, *Winter Blood* (1971).

Nash died in Manhattan on December 11, 2000, at the age of 87. Of *The Rainmaker*, ultimately his most memorable achievement, he said, “I tried to tell a simple story about droughts that happen to people, and about faith.”
FOREWORD

To *The Rainmaker* (Random House, 1954)

BY N. RICHARD NASH

When drought hits the lush grasslands of the richly fertile West, they are green no more and the dying is a palpable thing. What happens to verdure and vegetation, to cattle and livestock can be read in the coldly statistical little bulletins freely issued by the Department of Agriculture. What happens to the people of the West—beyond the calculable and terrible phenomena of sudden poverty and loss of substance—is an incalculable and febrile kind of desperation. Rain will never come again; the earth will be sere forever; and in all of heaven there is no promise of remedy.

Yet, men of wisdom like H.C. Curry know to be patient with heaven. They know that the earth will not thirst forever; they know that one day they will again awaken to a green
morning. Young people like Lizzie, his daughter, cannot know this as certainly as he does. Bright as she is, she cannot know. She can only count the shooting stars, and hope.

The play is set in such a drought-beset region in the moment when Lizzie’s hope is faltering. Because the hopes of Lizzie and h.c., of Jim and Starbuck and File are finally brought to blessing, because the people of the play are deserving and filled with love of one another—and most important, because it is not always that the hopes of deserving, loving human beings are blessed—this play is a comedy and a romance. It must never be forgotten that it is a romance, never for an instant by the director, the actors, the scenic designer, or the least-sung usher in the theater.

In this regard there must be, without eschewing truth, a kind of romantic beauty in the relationships of all the characters with one another. Especially in the Curry family, even when Noah is laying down the stern law of a rigid God who, to Noah, looks rather like an irate Certified Public Accountant. There must be love in the house, or somewhere a benign promise.

This same felicity in the sets. True, the Curry ranch house—the living and dining rooms, the kitchen—is a place where people scratch their heads and take their shoes off, where woodwork has to be scrubbed and pots scoured. But more important, it is a place where beauty is made out of affection and all manner of gentleness. The tack room, if seen realistically, might be a dustbin attractive only to the termites and the rodents of the night. But if the designer sees it romantically—as Lizzie might see it with all its memorabilia of childhood—it will tell the hopeful promise intended. Or File’s office—it is not an office really, although File’s roll-top desk is there and his old-fashioned telephone—it is File’s secret hiding place from the world, the island where he errantly believes he can bring balm to his loneliness.

If there is incidental music in the play, it should sing on the romantic instruments and forswear brass and tympani. It should lament on strings and woodwinds and promise sweet melody.

Perhaps the best rule of thumb in direction, acting, scenery, music is this oversimplification: Let us not use the panoramic lenses. Let us focus closely, but through a romantically gauzed lens, on the face of Lizzie’s loneliness, and on her hope. Life can be seen deeply through small lenses. And truthfully even through gauze.
On a western road trip he took in 1951, N. Richard Nash met an eight-year-old boy at a filling station. The boy was covered in grime and dirt, his complexion “the color of dust.” It hadn’t rained in a long time. He clutched a long, forked stick, which he shook at the sky every few minutes. “What’s that for?” Nash asked. “Rain,” he said. Recalling that encounter five years later, after The Rainmaker had become an international hit, Nash wrote,

I tried to tell a simple story about droughts that happen to people, and about faith. I tried to say that belief in a forked stick is sweet in an eight-year-old but a grownup has to find his magic in the rites of daily living. I tried to protest that the dreamers who are fugitive from the world have too long pretended that they alone know what is beautiful; that there’s beauty for those who stick around and have a good look at things. That there is beauty in reality, beauty in the balances of nature, no matter how brutal the imbalances; beauty in the togetherness of people which, sadly, must sometimes be measured by loneliness; beauty in seeing the fact and naming it the fact.

If that were all The Rainmaker had to say on the subject of dreams—that dreams are fine for children but that adults must settle for reality—it wouldn’t have become a phenomenon: when Nash recalled this meeting in 1956, the film version was about to be released and the play had been produced 90 times around the world. By the time Nash died in 2000, it had been translated into 40 languages, including an unwritten African one. Surely, there are few plays that stake the claims of reality over those of dreams and win the love and affection of a worldwide audience. The Rainmaker isn’t one of them.

For if we look closely at The Rainmaker, we see that it does not divide its characters into dreamers and realists. Rather, Nash populates his world with those for whom daring to dream is as natural as rain, and those who want in their hearts to dream but who, for any number of reasons, cannot take the risk. Lizzie Curry is one of those who are caught high and dry in a drought of dust and reality. “You’re all dreams,” she says to Starbuck. “And it’s no good to live in your dreams.” Starbuck, who wants things to be as beautiful when he gets them as they are when he thinks about them, replies, “It’s no good to live outside [your dreams] either.” “Somewhere between the two,” Lizzie offers as a compromise. At first glance her response doesn’t make much sense: What does it mean, how is it possible,
to live somewhere between dreams and reality? But she is wiser than she knows, and it is Nash’s accomplishment that he shows us that we can change the world of our quotidian reality if we nourish it with dreams.

Starbuck advertises himself as a rainmaker, a bringer of new life: “You’re in a parcel of trouble,” he says to Noah, the elder Curry brother and, like Lizzie, a hard-eyed non-dreamer. “You’ve lost twelve steers on the north range and sixty-two in the gully.” The solution, of course, is rain, which Starbuck promises in prodigious amounts: “Rain in buckets, rain in barrels, fillin’ the lowlands, floodin’ the gullies. And the land is as green as the valley of Adam.”

It is not necessarily rain that will make the world fertile. Starbuck makes it green for Lizzie through his dreams; his gift for dreaming big dreams is what gives Lizzy permission to have her small ones: “Like a man’s voice saying: ‘Lizzie, is my blue suit pressed?’ And the same man saying: ‘Scratch behind my shoulder blades.’” She says these are little, quiet dreams, but they are little only compared to the hope, which she cannot dare express, that they will come true. Being loved, and taking pleasure in doing the things that bring hap-
piness to someone she loves, are large dreams for Lizzie, indeed. Too large, in fact, for her to acknowledge or say out loud before Starbuck rides onto the Curry ranch with his own visionary dreams of a fabulous woman named Melisande, of being able to bring torrents of rain to a parched country, of a woman believing that she's beautiful when most everyone around her is telling her that she's plain. Starbuck's big dreams allow Lizzie to have hers, but not without a struggle. Some people have to be shaken awake, but others have to be startled into closing their eyes.

Like Starbuck, Jimmy, the youngest Curry, dreams big. When he tells H.C., “Pop, the whole world’s gonna blow up! The world’s gonna get all s-w-o-l-e up—and bust right in our faces!” one feels that if it does, it won’t be due to the curious theory of sunspots he describes, but because the world is simply too small to contain his dreams and longings. File, on the other hand—whom Nash described as “the dull stay-at-home whose boots were so deeply planted in the dust that his spurs actually jammed when he walked”—has given up dreaming. He has reduced his life to such tiny, manageable proportions that it can’t possibly disappoint him; it’s no coincidence that he lives in the town jail. Nor does Noah dream. We don’t know why he goes through life blinkered by his account books; we only know that he puts out the dreams of his sister and brother as if they were fires threatening to engulf him, and he holds his father’s dreams against him as if they were crimes.

By the end, though, even the dream-challenged characters show distinct signs of seeing things that aren’t there yet. Which is what dreaming does: it sharpens our vision and pushes the horizon beyond the point where our reason insists it lies.

_The Rainmaker_ actually makes two points about dreams: we can’t live entirely in them, but we can’t lead a hopeful life without them, and dreaming big increases the scale of the possible in the waking world. For that reason, N. Richard Nash insisted that _The Rainmaker_ is a hopeful play—which is what makes it a particularly American play, and one that, after 50 years, is still such a persuasive one.
A SHORT HISTORY OF PLUVICULTURE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

BY MARTIN SCHWARTZ

RAINMAKING AND THE MID-CENTURY MIND

Reading or watching The Rainmaker in our empirical age, we may be inclined to dismiss the very notion of producing rain from the ground— to say nothing of the thought of paying someone for their efforts—as fanciful at best. The Currys’ willingness even to entertain the idea that the itinerant Starbuck’s boasts could be anything but a scam might strike us as extremely wishful thinking. To appreciate N. Richard Nash’s work in its original context, however, we must recognize how far removed our automatic skepticism towards what seems to us an exotic, primitive superstition is from the relative currency rainmaking and rainmakers would have had in the minds of an audience of Nash’s contemporaries.

While a New York audience of the middle 1950s would likely have shared at least a modicum of our suspicion towards “pluviculture,” even the scientific case against rainmaking would by no means have appeared closed to them, and the cultural significance of the phenomenon was palpable, especially in the West. Pseudoscientific American rainmaking, many of the hallmarks of which we can discern in Starbuck’s unusual practices, was a fixture of the culture, economy, and lore of the western United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. A 1954 scholarly article called “Hatfield the Rainmaker” in Western Folklore refers to rainmaking as “one of the more contemporary miracles of science,” and the editors of the Stanford Law Review took it seriously enough to publish an article entitled “Tort Liability for Rainmaking” in 1949. Regarding the rainmakers themselves, mainstream media paid them considerable attention even years after The Rainmaker debuted. The Dallas Morning News of June 15, 1963, matter-of-factly reported that one Neal Bosco of Fabens, Texas, was offered $750 by residents of Waco to use “a system of flares which he ignites to release material which he says ‘seeds’ the clouds to make them release their moisture.”

EARLY HISTORY AND THE GOLDEN AGE

While the art of rainmaking was far from dead by the premiere of Nash’s play, the craft had already seen its glory days come and go well before World War II. Although, as W. E. Steps remarks in Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science, “the period of greatest early-day activity in Kansas in the rainmaking field occurred during the drouth [sic] years of 1890 to
“the history of rainmaking in the American West goes back a good deal farther than that. Numerous Native American groups, famously including the Hopi, have dedicated dances and highly cultivated rituals to the coming rains for millennia, and rainmaking and rain dances became a staple of western U.S. folklore.

Though Starbuck's methods themselves may owe more to pioneer folklore and the iconographic figure of the lone rainmaker on the Plains, the government and the scientific establishment also made significant forays into rainmaking during the 19th century. As Barbara Tuthill observes, the names of authorities like James P. Espy, General Robert Dryenforth, L. Gatham, Edward Powers, and William Morse Davis were frequently on the lips of rainmakers as they set up their towers or prepared their gaseous emissions. Almost all of these scholars have been more or less willfully forgotten by the scientific community.

To help us understand the position of rainmaking in the American society of the 1890s, it might be worthwhile to take a look at the procedure of the first government-appointed rainmaker, General Dryenforth. Congress appropriated some $19,000 in the drought years of the early 1890s to conduct official tests of rainmaking methods. Under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture, Dryenforth set off to Texas to begin the experiments. His cargo included: "sixty-eight explosive balloons, three large balloons for making ascensions, and material for making one hundred cloth-covered kites, beside the necessary explosives, etc." Of the experiment, according to Caldwell, "an observer stated that ‘it was a beautiful imitation of a battle.’" Though the results of the government tests were inconclusive, the official experiments only served to heighten the popular appeal of rainmaking—and rainmakers.

Despite government involvement, however, the tradition of rainmaking in the American West was dominated by the charisma and discretion of lone men. They always made certain that their reputations preceded them, often made reference to science in their broad claims about their practices, and invariably kept their “secret” close to the breast. Their methods commonly included producing explosions, releasing chemical gases, or building large towers on public fairgrounds for indeterminate purposes.

FRANK MELBOURNE AND THE KANSAS DROUGHT
During the Kansas drought of 1890–94, Frank Melbourne, the first great star of western rainmaking, came to prominence, traveling much of the region plying his craft. Because of his self-mythologizing, wide success, itinerant habits, and overblown assertions about the efficacy of his methods, Melbourne's story typifies the conception of the rainmaker in the popular culture of his time. Martha B. Caldwell writes:
The fame of Frank Melbourne, said to be an Australian, as a “rain wizard” had spread throughout the country. Marvelous stories were told of his operations at Canton, Ohio, where he was said to so control the weather that he could “bring rain at a given hour.” Since he was fond of outdoor sports he “so adjusted his machine that all the Sunday rains come late in the afternoon, after the baseball games and horse races for the day are over.” Mr. Melbourne said his machine was “so simple that were its character known to the public every man would soon own one and bring rain whenever he felt like it.”

Melbourne’s operations in Goodland, Kansas, were, in classic rainmaking style, both profoundly public and veiled in an intentional secrecy.

[O]n Wednesday he took his rain apparatus to the fair grounds to begin work [which] he performed in great secrecy; no one was allowed within the building and to keep the inquisitive from coming too close a rope barrier was erected about twenty feet from the building and the windows were curtained. However, everyone went up and “gazed” at the building and the small hole in the roof through which cloud-making substances escaped. . . . The upper story, containing four windows facing the different points of the compass, was Melbourne’s workroom. The room also contained a hole in the roof four inches in diameter for the escape of rain-making gases.

The residents of Goodland and numerous other Plains cities treated Melbourne’s work with the utmost seriousness. He was greeted with an official welcome wherever he went, and although there was always a vocal minority of those who considered his rainmaking either fraudulent or blasphemous, the arrival of the rainmaker was nothing if not a major civic event.

Rainmaking, the “never-failing drought crop,” as W. J. Humphries of the Weather Bureau put it, continued on in the Plains until relatively recently, but on a decidedly more modest scale. By the turn of the 20th century, with endless trainloads of people from all walks of life streaming into the semi-arid region of Southern California and trying to farm, the area of greatest uncertainty about rain had shifted west, and the stage for the greatest rainmaker of them all had been set.

THE GREAT RAINMAKER
As in so many genres, the rainmaker who enjoyed the widest acclaim and power—the man who epitomized his medium—was the last of his kind. Though the journalist and historian
Carey McWilliams calls Charles Mallory Hatfield—or Hatfield the Rainmaker, as he was popularly known, or simply the Great Rainmaker—“the first popular folk-hero” of Southern California, he lacked the unpolished braggadocio of the midwestern huckster of the 1890s: Hatfield was a professional. This “moisture accelerator,” whom nearly every Southern California municipality contracted between 1903 and 1928 “for fees ranging from $50 to $10,000,” was described in the San Diego Union as “a quietly dressed, slender man of middle height with square shoulders, who is crowding forty.” Well versed in the scientific literature, Hatfield peppered his sentences with scientific-sounding phrases, called himself a specialist in “meteorology, the science of the atmosphere,” and referred to his métier as creating “a chemical attraction or an affinity working in harmony with natural forces that make rain.”

While his language and appearance may have been more refined than those of his midwestern brethren, his means were similar. When contracted by a community, he would typically have several towers (or “evaporating tanks”) built, generally between 12 and 20 feet high, topped with platforms. These tanks gave the distinct impression that the rainmaker was hard at work, with the added benefit of ensuring that the public could have no clear idea of what exactly he was doing. On each platform, there were, “galvanized iron pans about 3 feet square and 9 inches deep containing Hatfield’s chemicals”—or, as Hatfield himself put it, “certain chemicals the character of which must necessarily remain secret.” Hatfield’s true methods, however, were the very soul of western rainmaking; as McWilliams writes:
Hatfield was a close student of weather charts. His usual technique was to wait until the dry season was far advanced and the people were beginning to despair of rain. Then he would appear upon the scene, sometimes as late as mid January, and obtain a contract to produce rain within, say, thirty or sixty days. And of course he never missed.

Dependent as rainmaking is on the vagaries of climate, most men who set themselves up as rainmakers were able to celebrate a triumph or two. Unlike most rainmakers, however, Hatfield almost never failed, and his successes were fantastic. “One of his last great feats,” reports McWilliams, “was to produce forty inches of rainfall in three hours on the Mojave Desert near Randsburg.” Impressively though his desert deluge may seem, it pales in comparison to his San Diego flood of 1916.

“The most potent test I ever made,” Hatfield called the flood, and the damages it incurred ran into the tens of millions of dollars. The San Diego Union of December 14, 1915, records: “The city council signed a contract yesterday with Hatfield, the Moisture Accelerator. He has promised to fill the Morena reservoir to overflowing by December 20, 1916, for $10,000.” Hatfield immediately began setting up his “evaporator tanks” at Morena. By January 20, writes Tuthill, “Black headlines screamed, ‘San Diego in State of Flood.’” The next day, Hatfield was reputed to have called City Hall, saying, “I just wanted to tell you that it is only sprinkling now. So far we have encountered only a couple of showers. Within the next few days I expect to make it really rain.” The torrents continued, with brief respites, for weeks, breaking the Otay dam, leaving thousands homeless, many dead, and San Diego entirely cut off from the rest of the country. This was rainmaking on a grand scale, and Hatfield became an instant national celebrity. When he showed up at City Hall, demanding his $10,000, the City Attorney told him that he would give him credit for the water in the reservoir only if he accepted the $6,000,000 in suits filed against the city for flood damages. Practical rainmaker that he was, Hatfield declined.

Contracts in California stopped coming in once the Boulder Dam Act was passed in 1928, guaranteeing a secure source of water, and since the Great Rainmaker’s retreat into private life, large-scale weather modification has been undertaken almost entirely through government offices.

While rainmaking might not have been the model of contemporary scientific thought for Nash and his audience, they would have had several powerful ideas to draw from on the subject. The archetypes of the government scientist, the itinerant Plains rainmaker, and the modern, miracle-working “moisture accelerator” would all have enriched the original audience’s appreciation of The Rainmaker.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways does The Rainmaker represent a version of “the American dream”? How do you define “the American dream”?

2. Consider the self-images, and the personas they present to others, of Lizzie, File, and Starbuck. How do these characters change over the course of the play? What or who influences that change? Can you identify their specific moments of self-discovery?

3. Playwright N. Richard Nash said that in writing The Rainmaker he intended to tell “a simple story about droughts that happen to people, and about faith.” Do you think he succeeded? How many types of drought are there in the play? What role does faith play in the events that take place? What does each of the characters hope for? Do they get it? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. In an article about The Rainmaker, Nash also wrote, “There is beauty in reality, beauty in the balances of nature, no matter how brutal the imbalances; beauty in the togetherness of people which, sadly, must sometimes be measured by loneliness.” How is this statement reflected in the play? Which characters share Nash’s belief in the beauty of reality, and which don’t? Why do you think so?

5. Is H.C. right to say that Lizzie will never be satisfied unless she is married? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think Lizzie chooses to stay with File instead of leaving with Starbuck? Would you make the same choice? Why or why not? What do you think life with Starbuck would be like? How will her life with File be different?

7. What do you think of the design for this production of The Rainmaker? How do the design elements (sets, costumes, lighting) affect your perception of the story? If you were designing a production of this play, how would your design be different? Why?

8. How has the social and economic status of women changed since the 1930s, when the play is set; the 1950s, when it was written; and today? Do you think Lizzie is a typical woman of her time? If so, why? If not, why not? Can you relate to Lizzie?

9. What does the rain mean—literally and symbolically—for each of the Currys? For File? For Starbuck?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...


Terrill, Bertha M. Household Management. Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1907.


