

THE MINE WITH THE IRON DOOR & THE RIALTO THEATRE'S 90TH ANNIVERSARY *JAMES REEL, 2010*

The Rialto Theatre could hardly mark its 90th anniversary with a richer celebration of Tucson's heritage than this screening—the first in a lifetime—of *The Mine with the Iron Door*.

The film is based on a novel by the best-selling American author of the first quarter of the 20th century, Harold Bell Wright, one of Tucson's most prominent citizens in the 1920s. The story is set in the Tucson area (specifically, Oracle and environs); the movie was filmed locally, and premiered at the Rialto in 1924.

The movie was long thought lost to the vaults of time, if it was thought of at all; the only two known surviving prints were recently tracked down and restored by Demion Clinco, president of the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, and a new score, performed live (as would have been the case in the 1920s), has been written by Tucson-born, New York-based composer and pianist Brian Holman.

HAROLD BELL WRIGHT

As enthusiast Gerry Chudleigh posits in an essay at the official Harold Bell Wright website, “Most people today are surprised to learn that during the first quarter of the 20th century the novels of Harold Bell Wright (1872–1944) outsold every other American writer. Newspapers of the day claimed Wright was the first person to become a millionaire by writing novels, and some say he was the first author to write a novel that reached a million sales. If not true, neither statement can be far wrong. ... Between 1903 and 1942, Harold Bell Wright wrote 19 books, many scripts for stage plays, and several magazine articles. At least 15 movies were made from his novels. Six of Wright's books appeared on the top 10 best sellers lists, two of them twice.”

Wright was a tubercular Midwesterner who started out as a Disciples of Christ pastor. His first book, in 1903, was derived from story-homilies he'd read his congregation during evening services. His subsequent novels were what Wright called “inspirational literature”: stories about how individuals—usually on the wild Western frontier—could uphold basic Christian values through their everyday actions.

Even at the peak of his popularity—the years leading up to and just beyond World War I—Wright was denigrated by more literary novelists and critics as a crafter of sermonizing melodramas peopled by simplistic characters who personified either good or evil, lacking the moral ambiguity to suggest a resemblance to actual human beings.

Yet Wright's novels sold better than the other literature of the time, largely because his publishers marketed them to rural readers—people who presumably had little interest in the more urban-centered and morally complex works of the likes of Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair or Frank Norris. Such readers surely appreciated Wright's focus on morality as a matter of individual behavior, independent of the influence of often hypocritical

denominations; they also probably enjoyed his ridicule of the soft, morally corrupt Eastern intelligentsia and promotion of upstanding frontier life. A few gunfights scattered through the stories didn't hurt his popularity, either.

Wright, like about a quarter of Tucson's population in the 1920s, was a "lunger"—pronounced with a hard G, as in "lung," referring to tuberculosis patients seeking relief and possibly a cure in the southwest's hot, dry climate. He'd initially paid an extended visit in 1912, staying in a house near Speedway and Fourth while writing one of his novels. A few years later, when it became apparent that his home base of Southern California wasn't doing him enough good, he began spending more and more time in Tucson, residing here full-time starting in 1919. He bought himself a white suit (perhaps under the sartorial inspiration of Mark Twain, but decades before Tom Wolf) to reflect the sun as he sat outdoors as much as possible, breathing the dry air and writing his books.

By 1922 he was living in a home he'd built on a 160-acre parcel near Speedway and Wilmot, a good five miles east of the city's main development. (It was later turned into the subdivision called Harold Bell Wright Estates, with streets named after the novelist's characters and titles.) Wright was determined to get away from it all, yet at the same time he was a model of civic-mindedness. He helped spearhead the construction of the Temple of Music and Art, did charity work for St. Mary's Hospital and wrote at least one play specifically to be performed by local amateurs. In 1924 the *Arizona Daily Star* printed an eight-page Sunday supplement in praise of Wright and his good works, and not coincidentally tied it in with a new film adaptation of his novel *The Mine with the Iron Door*, set in the Cañada del Oro near the Santa Catalina Mountains.

By the early 1930s, city development was beginning to stretch out toward Wright's desert haven, and the increasing amount of dust stirred up by traffic on "the Speedway" was hardly ideal for a TB patient. Wright eased out of Tucson, first spending time in Hawaii and ultimately resettling near San Diego, where he died in 1944—having outlived his popularity by a couple of decades.

THE MINE WITH THE IRON DOOR

Wright's 11th book, published in 1923, is a Western melodrama/morality tale, populated by crusty prospectors, a fugitive from unjust incarceration, a pure young heroine, vicious outlaws and—most interestingly of all to a 21st-century audience—a fairly antagonistic Native American who is given a sympathetic portrayal: He's bitter because of injustices inflicted upon his (unnamed) people by the same white society that has given him a substantial education. Yet another character may to some extent be a Harold Bell Wright self-portrait: an educated, morally upright lunger nicknamed "Saint Jimmy" who tutors the heroine in matters intellectual and spiritual.

The *Mine with the Iron Door* was a best seller in 1923, and Hollywood, then as now, was quick to put its money on a sure winner. The movie, antiquated as its style may now seem, is perhaps more palatable to today's audiences than the book itself, which is burdened by Wright's characteristic moralizing and long stretches of dialogue in hokey dialect. (The Native American character, interestingly, speaks in an equally artificial but highly elevated manner.)

The enduring strength of the novel, though, is Wright's flair for scenic description, something carried over lovingly into the 1924 film. This was perhaps the first Hollywood movie to be filmed entirely on location (aside from some interiors shot in a California studio), and director Sam Wood made the most of what Southern Arizona nature provided; Demion Clinco, whose cinematic detective work led to this weekend's screenings, calls the movie "a rumination on the saguaro." The crew was based at what are now Rancho Linda Vista and the Triangle L Ranch, shooting in and near Oracle. The filmmakers even returned during the monsoon season to shoot a harrowing sequence involving an actual flash flood—this was not a Hollywood special effect, but Nature operating at full force.

It was a big-budget, high-interest movie that met with the approval of the period's film critics; Clinco praises it for the actors' ability to "convey incredible luminosity and emotion across the screen." But before it was submitted for critical appraisal, Wright arranged for the very first screening to take place at the Rialto Theater, then one of downtown's newer and fancier movie and vaudeville houses. People lined up around the block, extra screenings had to be scheduled, and, typical of a Wright endeavor, the proceeds were donated to charity.

But in the 1920s, movies, no matter how popular, were ephemeral. There were no cable channels or video rental markets to give them continued life, and so many new movies came out every week that the old ones were dumped as soon as they'd outlasted their profitability. The advent of talkies precluded their re-release, anyway (*The Mine* was remade as a talkie in 1936). Of the few reels that were archived, many succumbed over the years to warehouse fires—celluloid was highly flammable. Perhaps only 10 percent of all silent films have survived.

Researching the movie for the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, Clinco found abundant ephemera—lobby posters, glass slides used as "previews of coming attractions," other material—scattered hither and yon, but the only actual print of the movie he could find was housed at the Russian Film Archive in Moscow. Having been stored after a run in Russian theaters, the print had Cyrillic title cards (or intertitles, the flashes of printed narration or dialogue between shots of the actors), and nobody knew the condition of the print, or whether or not it was complete. Negotiations with the Russian archive proved difficult, but luckily Clinco heard of a second print at the Archives Françaises du Film of the Centre National de la Cinématographie, in Paris. It was much easier to elicit a digital copy of the film from this organization, and this is the basis of what's being screened at the Rialto this weekend.

The print had French intertitles, which, absent a shooting script, had to be translated and in many cases paraphrased into something more idiomatic in English; the intertitles you see do not correspond exactly to those used in America in 1924. Furthermore, only about 65 out of the original 80 minutes of the finished film have survived in this print. Missing footage near the end may cause some confusion regarding the death of one of the characters.

Without undertaking a full-fledged restoration, Clinco and L.I.T.S.A. Film Production have done what they can to clean up the print and extend some reaction shots that have survived as only a few frames. Note, however, that the scenes tinted blue or sepia appear as they did in the 1920s; staining the film emulsion with dye in this rudimentary way was common in the silent era.

BRIAN HOLMAN'S SCORE

Silent films were not, strictly speaking, silent. Although they lacked recorded sound, they were almost always accompanied by live music, ranging from somebody banging out a medley of classical tunes on an upright piano to virtuosos manipulating garishly fun Wurlitzer organs replete with special audio effects, to, at the more lavish houses, small orchestras. Initially the scores were improvised by the keyboard player; eventually the distributors included with the print a cue sheet and a compilation of photoplay music, drawing on well-known classical pieces and “stock” music written by studio employees, to be mixed and matched as the action required. Big-budget movies would be exhibited in some theaters with fully original scores.

No score or cue sheet specific to *The Mine with the Iron Door* has yet turned up, so Demion Clinco enlisted his childhood friend Brian Holman to create one.

Holman grew up in Tucson, and while attending Salpointe Catholic High School he started dabbling in composition under the supervision of John Snavely and Carroll Reinhart of the Tucson Symphony Young Composers Project. The TSO and Civic Orchestra of Tucson premiered two of his compositions. He enrolled in Arizona State University to study piano performance with Robert Hamilton, and obtained an English degree as well. For grad school, he headed east to the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied piano with Nina Svetlanova and chamber music with Ruth Laredo.

Holman's love of opera, spurred by childhood attendance at Arizona Opera, led him to build credentials as a coach and opera conductor, working with opera companies and voice teachers in New York, and conducting whenever he gets the chance. He composes, he says, “when asked.”

Of his work for *The Mine with the Iron Door*, Holman explained to me the historical significance of the film and his concept for presenting it at the Rialto, and completely underestimating the length of the film, I accepted. Demion and I had discussed period practice, and he was very kind to send me historical materials he had found. He told me he wanted something ‘Western’ but also ‘Nino Rota’ in style. [Rota is best known for his scores for Federico Fellini films.] Ultimately I decided to write original material, inspired by the melodramatic qualities of silent film, Western folk music, and early 20th-century ‘serious’ composers of the time (I admit there are hints of Puccini, Prokofiev and Bartók all about). For instance, since the plot seemed so similar to *La fanciulla del West*, Puccini's use of whole-tone scales was an obvious influence for capturing the wide-open, lawless quality of the Old West. However for this film, I also used whole-tone to capture the magical, hypnotic power of gold over the speculators who search in vain for the mine. There are motives and themes associated with each character, which I try to develop over the course of the film.

“Since the film was cut long ago, it was quite a challenge to impose any sense of musical structure, especially since I felt it imperative to follow the action (at times quite closely for emphasis; I guess this is due to my operatic background). Many of the film edits are quite abrupt, as parts of the film are missing, so making sense of these moments was a chore, but Demion and his crew did their best to smooth over some of the more awkward transitions.

Given the wide scope of the film, I envisioned something more than a solo piano concert, and based on a couple of silent film showings I'd seen here in New York at Le Poisson Rouge and the Gershwin Hotel, where young composers had set clips to music, a chamber group seemed like quite an effective model to me. For practical reasons we settled on a small chamber quartet, which I felt would allow for a wide variety of color possibilities with minimal personnel. The ensemble consists of piano, violin, cello, flute and clarinet.

“This was a rush job, but as my copyist and I are furiously correcting the final moments of the score for the players, I have to say that this was quite a worthwhile project. While to our modern sensibilities the film may seem too sentimental, I do think *Mine with the Iron Door* has merits that make it stand out among other works of the period. Cinematically, there are some stunning moments: the flash flood scene, the knife fight between Natachee and Sonora Jack (decades before Steadycam), the panoramic postcard views of desert landscape. Also, the love-story element goes beyond the romantic leads, as the relationship between the two miners who raise Marta is given surprisingly tender treatment. Above all, there is a tremendous sense of atmosphere and tension that Wood creates, to which I've tried to remain true.”

James Reel, a former editor and arts editor of the Tucson Weekly, is Arizona Public Media's classical music director, and a board officer of Winding Road Theater Ensemble and the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music.

TUCSON HISTORIC PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

The Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, founded 1985, is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the distinctive and irreplaceable historic resources of Tucson and Pima County. Historic preservation is an essential component of our city. Our historic buildings create a unique sense of place; our historic neighborhoods are the cornerstone of our community brand. Tucson's built environment is not only a tangible link to the past but an irreplaceable asset, inspiring thousands of cultural heritage tourists yearly. The Rialto Theatre is a prime example of the adaptive reuse that can help our historic buildings survive.