



## Michigan playwright's richly textured 'Dead Man's Shoes' a feast of fine acting, set design

Milan playwright Joseph Zettelmaier has just been celebrated in a four-page profile in American Theatre magazine. The praise is well-deserved.

Zettelmaier's two previous works, 2010's "It Came From Mars" and last year's "And the Creek Don't Rise," were among the best productions on any Detroit-area stage during their respective seasons. His eagerly awaited "Dead Man's Shoes," which opens tonight at Performance Network Theatre in Ann Arbor, only stokes the buzz suggesting that Zettelmaier is the best and most prolific playwright working in Michigan today.

A joint production with Williamston Theatre, which premiered it last month, the Western tale is a feast of set design and performance in service of a richly textured script. Along with combining history and myth, the show delivers some simple truths about friendship, redemption and the dignity of man in a world where life is exceedingly cheap.

"Dead Man's Shoes" was inspired by an

odd bit of Old West history. A cattle rustler named George Parrott (a.k.a. Big Nose George) was strung up from a telegraph pole in 1881 and his body was sold to a doctor, John Eugene Osbourne, who studied Parrott's brain and then turned the outlaw's skin into a pair of fancy men's shoes. Osbourne later became the governor of Wyoming and wore the shoes to his inauguration. In Zettelmaier's tall tale, a member of Parrott's gang, Injun Bill Picote (Drew Parker), embarks on a mission to give the shoes a proper burial. "A man," he scowls, "is not shoes."

The play opens in jail and finds Bill tangling with Froggy (Aral Gribble), an unkempt fellow in the adjoining cell. They begin as classic comic foils, with Froggy as fat and chatty as Bill is lean and close-lipped. Out of the blue, the sheriff (Paul Hopper) walks in, drops a ring of keys in front of the cell and tells the boys adios. Froggy gets to the keys first and considers stranding Bill before deciding that they both deserve their freedom.





In both attitude and deep barrel voice, Johnny Cash is the inspiration for Parker's Injun Bill. You spend the first part of the play gazing at the brim of his hat as he describes in clinical detail the way you need to apply different knives when you're killing a man. Later, he explains his passion for retrieving the shoes fashioned from George Parrott. The outlaw wasn't a nice guy, you understand, but he was the closest thing Bill ever had to a friend.

In terms of storytelling, "Dead Man's Shoes" covers a lot of ground, which forces the show's designers (led by Performance Network artistic director David Wolber) to get creative in fashioning the varied settings. Kirk Domer's backdrops are painted on a sheet of fabric that unreels from a huge spool standing upright on the stage.

Simple lighting cues create jail cells, while offstage actors become sound-effect artists when a metal-door clank is required. Amber Marisa Cook's costumes -- from Froggy's moth-eaten cavalry uniform (he survived Custer's fated charge at Little Big Horn) to the duster, Stetson and boots that define Bill's badass man in black -- are dusty and tired, just like the characters they cloak.

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**More Details: 'Dead Man's Shoes'**

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out of four stars

7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat.,

2 p.m. Sun. Through April 8.

Performance Network Theatre

120 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor

[www .performance network .org](http://www.performance-network.org)

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