

THE AMERICANA ROCK OPERA



A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF THE
GREAT AMERICAN WEST

THE AMERICANA ROCK OPERA

West Of The Jordan is a live performance piece comprised of original music and lyrics performed in an elaborate world of architectural set design and dynamically projected images of fine art, historical photography, and panoramic landscapes.

In an epic tale filled with vivid characters and intersecting story lines, the music and lyrics of *West of the Jordan* will be met in equal measure with the flow of the visual elements projected across various surfaces designed into the elaborate set.

The resulting array of creative elements will allow the viewer to simultaneously contemplate multiple layers of the complex history, natural splendor and mythic essence of the land we fondly call “The West.”

THE PROVENANCE OF THE PROJECT

First conceived in an academic setting in 1979, West of the Jordan was an early project of the young concert promoter turned writer/producer Jim Edwards, relaunched in 2012 with the late producer/recording artist Steve Ripley. Edwards was the co-founder of the rock era at Tulsa's legendary Cain' Ballroom in 1974 and went on to producing and writing roles in music, film, journalism and literature. Ripley was known as a savant recording engineer, inventor and guitarist associated with the likes of Bob Dylan, Leon Russell and Eddie van Halen, before emerging as the writer, producer and frontman for the double-platinum alt-country band The Tractors.

"It's like the skin of History, stretched out across the drum frame of America."

— Peter Rowan, Songwriter, Recording Artist

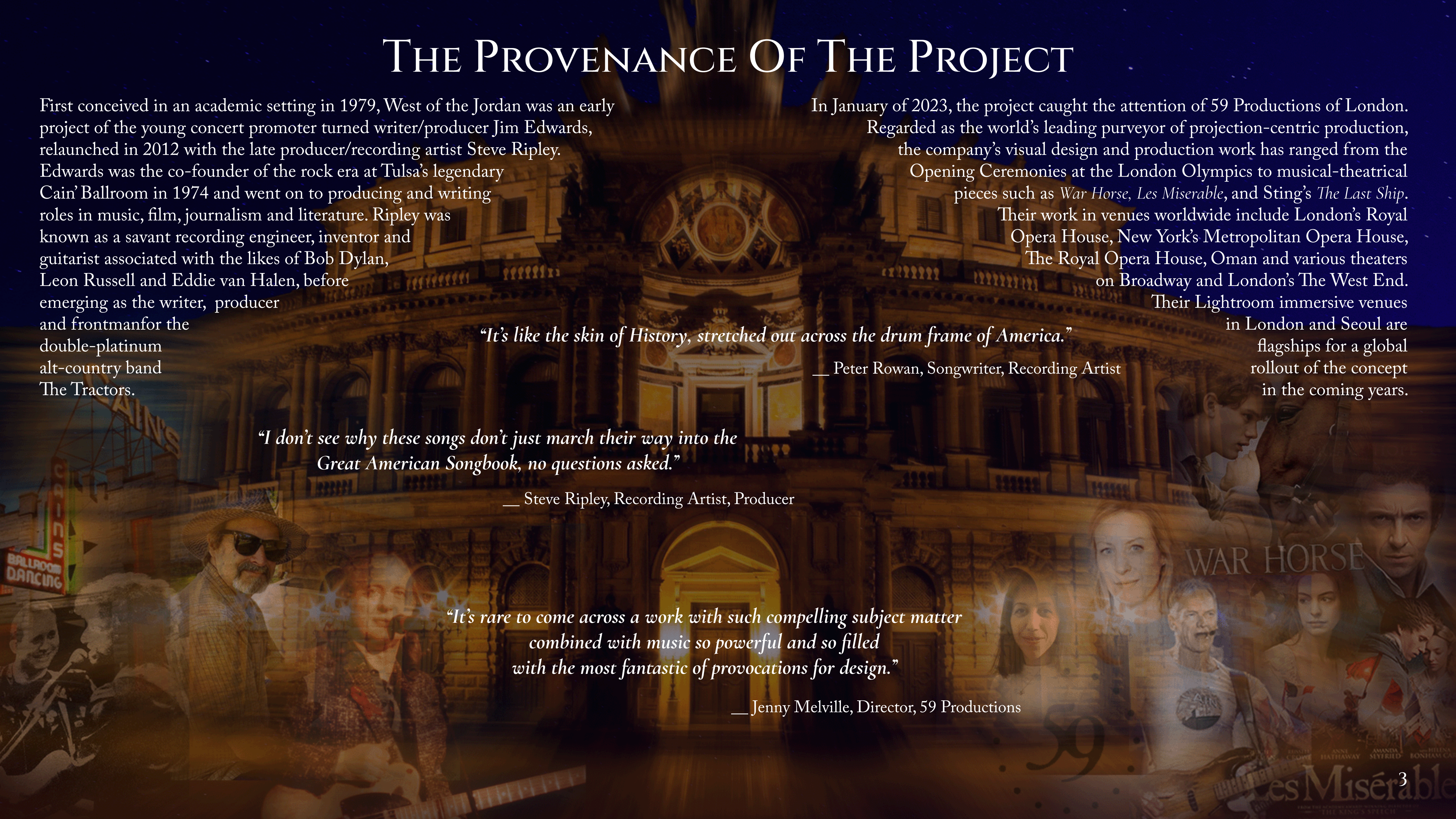
"I don't see why these songs don't just march their way into the Great American Songbook, no questions asked."

— Steve Ripley, Recording Artist, Producer

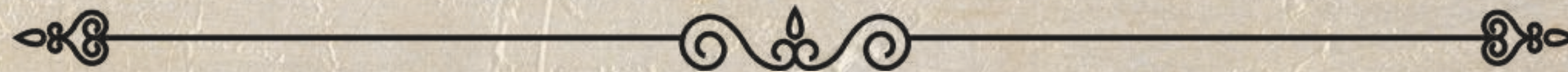
"It's rare to come across a work with such compelling subject matter combined with music so powerful and so filled with the most fantastic of provocations for design."

— Jenny Melville, Director, 59 Productions

In January of 2023, the project caught the attention of 59 Productions of London. Regarded as the world's leading purveyor of projection-centric production, the company's visual design and production work has ranged from the Opening Ceremonies at the London Olympics to musical-theatrical pieces such as *War Horse*, *Les Miserable*, and Sting's *The Last Ship*. Their work in venues worldwide include London's Royal Opera House, New York's Metropolitan Opera House, The Royal Opera House, Oman and various theaters on Broadway and London's The West End. Their Lightroom immersive venues in London and Seoul are flagships for a global rollout of the concept in the coming years.



THE SETTING



WEST OF THE JORDAN

BENT'S FORT

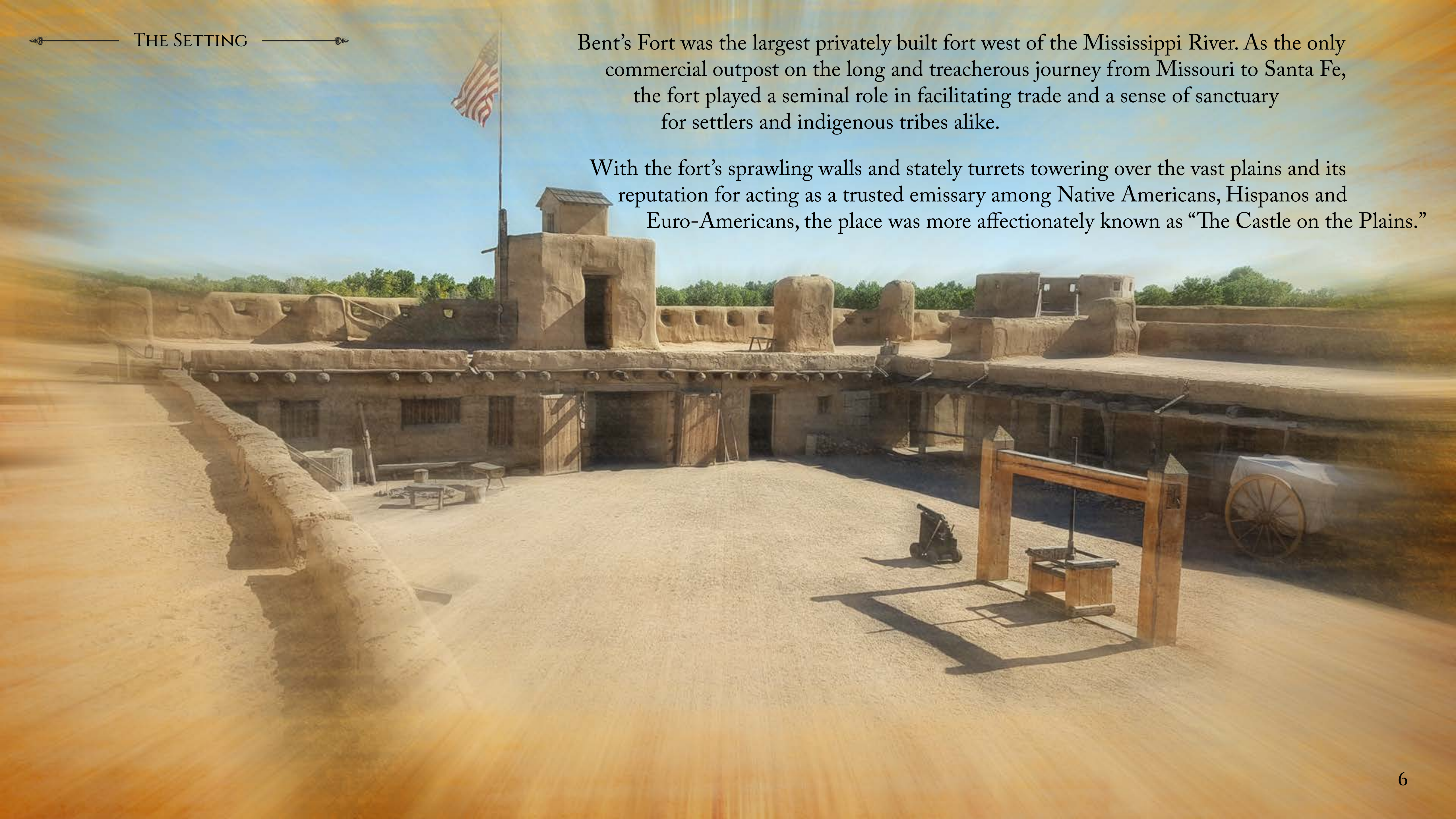
With a back story spanning some twenty thousand years before European contact, the main action of the opera is set in the twilight of the so-called "Wild West" period, the years in the middle of the 19th century when the transition from a tentatively shared wilderness to a Euro-American civilization was at its climax.

The storylines of a cast of characters representing some of the principal archetypes of the West converge at an historic crossroads-of-cultures in eastern Colorado called Bent's Fort. There the travelers share the diverse tales of their journeys to and through the vast expanses of the West.



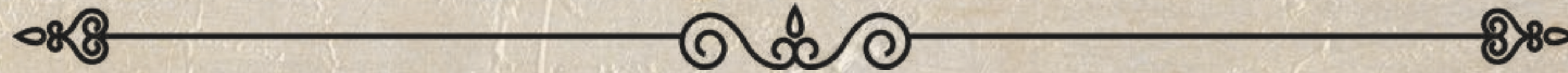
Bent's Fort was the largest privately built fort west of the Mississippi River. As the only commercial outpost on the long and treacherous journey from Missouri to Santa Fe, the fort played a seminal role in facilitating trade and a sense of sanctuary for settlers and indigenous tribes alike.

With the fort's sprawling walls and stately turrets towering over the vast plains and its reputation for acting as a trusted emissary among Native Americans, Hispanos and Euro-Americans, the place was more affectionately known as "The Castle on the Plains."



Given its historically accurate role as a haven of intercultural commerce and peaceful coexistence in an otherwise harsh and violent land, Bent's Fort is the perfect setting for the kind of "stranger-comes-in-from-the-cold" device that is the central conceit of the opera:
On an imagined makeshift stage in the courtyard of the fort, the guests are invited to tell their tales by way of song to the hosts and an ever-changing crowd of sympathetic travelers at the legendary Castle on the Plains.

BACKSTORY



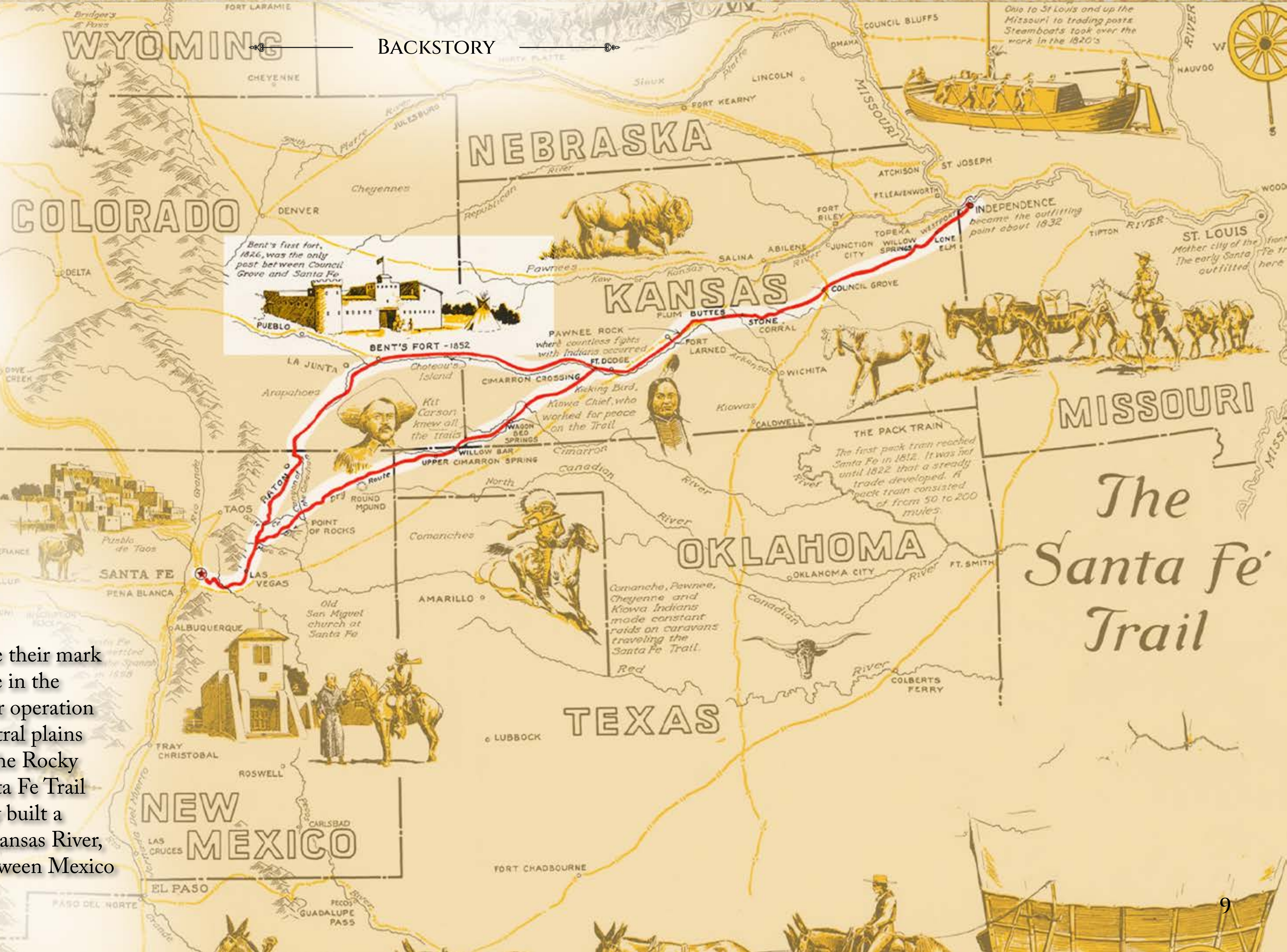
WEST OF THE JORDAN

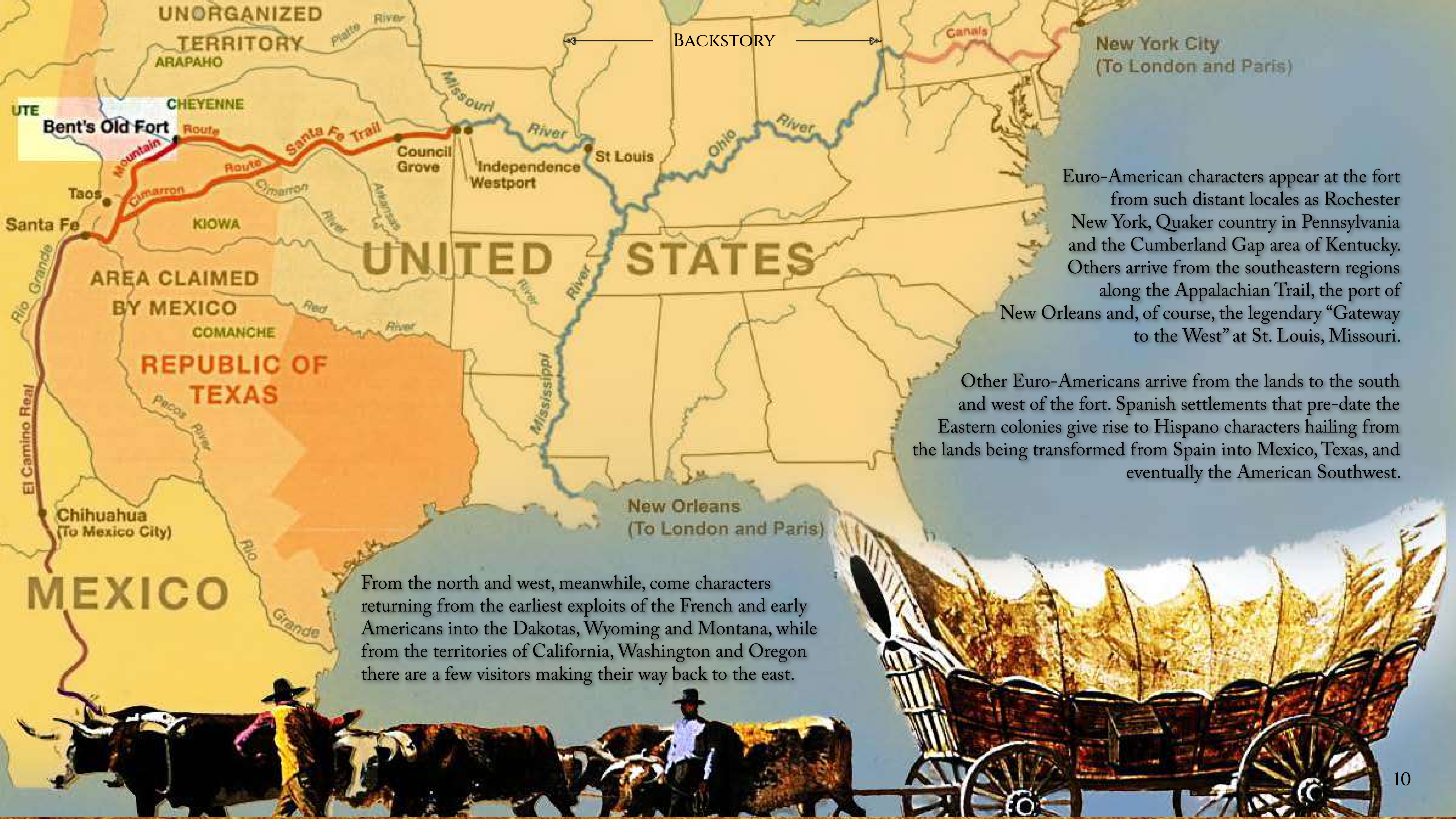
BACKSTORY

The proprietors of Bent's Fort were the brothers Charles and William Bent and a French-American named Ceran St. Vrain.

The St. Vrain family had been French aristocrats and the Bent brothers traced their lineage back to the Mayflower and forward-- by marriage -- into membership in the Southern Cheyenne tribe and the Hispano culture, respectively.

The Bents and St. Vrain had made their mark in the final glory days of the fur trade in the northern plains and then moved their operation to the western edge of the south-central plains in the shadow of the front range of the Rocky Mountains. Located on the Old Santa Fe Trail from Independence to Santa Fe, they built a massive adobe fort alongside the Arkansas River, which was at the time the border between Mexico and the United States.





BACKSTORY

UTE
Bent's Old Fort

New York City
(To London and Paris)

Euro-American characters appear at the fort from such distant locales as Rochester New York, Quaker country in Pennsylvania and the Cumberland Gap area of Kentucky. Others arrive from the southeastern regions along the Appalachian Trail, the port of New Orleans and, of course, the legendary "Gateway to the West" at St. Louis, Missouri.

Other Euro-Americans arrive from the lands to the south and west of the fort. Spanish settlements that pre-date the Eastern colonies give rise to Hispano characters hailing from the lands being transformed from Spain into Mexico, Texas, and eventually the American Southwest.

From the north and west, meanwhile, come characters returning from the earliest exploits of the French and early Americans into the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana, while from the territories of California, Washington and Oregon there are a few visitors making their way back to the east.

BACKSTORY

An equal number of characters make their appearance from the ranks of the First Nations who, as the story opens, still have some measure of control over the embattled domains stretching south to north from Mexico to Canada and east to west from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.

There is a large permanent settlement of Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne just a few miles away and a seasonal settlement of various tribes just outside the walls of Bent's Fort during the trading months of mid-spring to early autumn.

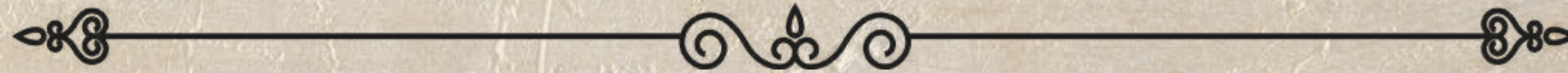


Along with a large contingent from the nearby Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne villages, the other tribal traders and visiting bands frequenting the fort include, from the north and west, the Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Nez Perce, Ute and Blackfeet.

From the north and east come the Osage, Pawnee, and Kiowa. From the south and west come the Comanche, Navajo and Apache.



THE STORY



WEST OF THE JORDAN

PRELUDE:

Unlike the rest of the Opera, the opening song is set in modern times. With the stage dark, moving images of Western skies cross the main screens behind and over the proscenium. The point of view in the film slowly pans down to a figure of a leather-jacketed biker with his back to the camera, an embroidered logo of “Angel of the West” on his back, and his boot-heeled feet planted on a two-lane black top. He takes off when the slower instrumental introduction gives way to the up-tempo music.

The filmed piece then fades and the focus shifts to the live performers, backed by imagery ranging from Western landscape paintings to historical photography to montages of pop-cultural appropriations of indigenous culture and responses by modern native artists to such things. At the end of the song, the film resumes as the motorcyclist spins out and crashes. There is a long closing musical passage as images suggest the backward movement of time to pre-Columbian civilizations, and then back to the middle of the 19th century. On the screens closest to the stage, images of medical tubing and instrumentation and the sounds of medical monitoring suggest the rider is in a coma.



The film fades and the lights come up on the character of William Bent, seemingly alone in the courtyard of the fort until a light slowly illuminates a silent man stooped over the keyboard of a dusty upright piano on the makeshift stage. He lifts his head, puts his hands on the keyboard and begins to play the song, “Castle on the Plains.”

ACT 1

As the “Castle on the Plains” song unfolds, William Bent is joined on stage by his wife, brother and partner, offering up a stirring and wide-ranging invocation. Following the rallying refrain of the song, the Bents and St. Vrain settle into their roles as gregarious and sympathetic hosts, inviting their wayfaring guests to take the stage in the courtyard, there to tell their tales in movements ranging from one to three songs of traditional formats or suites held together by recurring melodic and narrative themes.

A young beauty from the antebellum South has left that stifling society behind in search of something resembling gender equality. She tells of her friendship with The Riverboat Queen as she made her way up the Mississippi River to St. Louis only to be disappointed by a different brand of misogyny. She heads west on her own and at the fort she meets up with a gambler with an eye for second chances and a plan for a new life in San Francisco.

*“We’re all equal
As sisters and brothers,
But some people,
Are just more equal than others . . .”*

The Kentucky Frontiersman was once a trusted trader and hunting partner to the Shawnee tribes in Appalachia. He recounts his cataclysmic fall from grace when he had accidentally killed a Shawnee brave in self-defense. He heads west in hopes of outrunning his guilt and perhaps getting a shot at redemption. Instead, he soon finds himself accused of a series of crimes he did not commit and is chased by a posse of vigilantes.

*“These crimes of which you speak
Are not the ones I’m guilty of,
And you have no authority,
To be my final judge . . .”*

A fellow calling himself the Irish Cowboy shares a duet with his traveling companion, the Osage Dancer. They had met “across the great divide”, discovered that the land of his dreams was the land of her forefathers and had somehow fallen in love anyway. The celebration of “something greater here, clothed in the Mystery” hints at the opera’s intention to find safe havens in a harsh and violent world.

*“Down they climb,
Onto the canyon floor,
Far from the raging war,
Into love’s undoing . . .”*

Black Kettle is a leader of the Southern Cheyenne. A gifted horseman, hunter and warrior from a very young age, Black Kettle eventually became highly influential among the Peace Chiefs from the Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho alliance who advocated for an end to the violence on the Plains. His white counterpart throughout these endeavors was William Bent, a longtime friend who became family when one of Black Kettle’s daughters married one of William Bent’s sons. The largely tragic outcomes of Black Kettle’s quest for peace are central to the storyline of the opera.

In a layered vignette comprised of several song/movements, a restless socialite from upstate New York takes to heart her local newspaper's advice to "go West, young man" and arrives at the Castle on the Plains with a small cadre of travelers hoping to find a scout to take them further west. The perfect man for the job is also a perfect drunk, providing comic relief and one of man forays into the contradictions of human nature woven into the story.

*"But when the morning comes,
I'll be up before the sun,
Ready to lead you,
Into the land of your dreams . . ."*

*GO WEST,
YOUNG MAN GO WEST!*

A cavalry soldier traumatized by horrific experiences in two of the early battles of the Civil War has headed west seeking solitude and rest. The Civil War era term for PTSD was "Soldier's Heart" and one of the remedies often tried was to simply live as far from society as one could get. Like many former soldiers heading west, though, the young man arriving at Bent's Fort would soon find that society was close on his heels and a deeper cure might be needed.

*"The fear and indecision,
When you don't know where to start;
The poet's and physician's,
They just call it Soldier's Heart . . ."*

THE STORY

ACT 1

An enigmatic character telling one of the longest tales is a former "circuit rider", an itinerant protestant preacher who had been sent years earlier by President Andrew Jackson to accompany the Creek and Cherokee Nations on the forced relocation from their homelands in Georgia and Tennessee to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma, the infamous event known as the Trail of Tears. After having emerged from that horrific experience a radically changed man of wildly unorthodox faith, he is now known as "The Medicine Man of the Cloth."

*"His eyes open wide
To a God so alive and untamed,
Long before white men like him
Came proclaiming His name . . ."*

The first act ends with a bittersweet reunion between the Lakota Sioux leader Red Cloud and a war-weary field general from the Army of the West, friends from the days when, as the song recounts, "the buffalo were many and the white men were few." On the eve of Red Cloud's historic journey to Washington, DC to meet with President Ulysses S. Grant, the two men discuss the grim prospects of the coming conflicts before taking solace in a long journey back into the early days of their friendship, where a shared vision of the natural order and the higher dimensions had offered a sense of spirituality that increasingly seems like their only hope.

*"Oh my brother, I must warn you,
Of the sorrow waiting for you,
In this house divided in the East;
The honor of our greatest men
Is poisoned by their next-of-kin,
Who'd rather fight for land than
live in peace . . ."*

ACT 2

While some of the subplots expressed by song at the Fort remain more serene or playfully adventurous, the main storyline begins to take a darker turn.

Leaders of the various tribes become more divided on the issue of how to deal with the growing numbers of settlers, miners, and soldiers.

Increasingly, the Euro-Americans making their way across the plains begin to pose an existential threat to the First Nations' reliance on the vast plains ecosystem, and various tribes start to put up greater resistance. The ensuing violence spirals into a escalating cycle of atrocities and retaliations.

As revealed in the first act of the Opera, William Bent has married into the tribe of Northern Cheyenne, his largest trading partners and earliest friends in the region. He has five children who are primarily raised in the Cheyenne village near Bent's Fort but spend much of the long trading season in and around the multi-cultural milieu at the Fort. The boys are trained as Cheyenne horsemen, hunters and warriors, with the oldest son George becoming a particularly powerful young man. As they get older, the children are eventually sent to live with family friends near Kansas City to obtain modern educations, while returning to spend summers in the Cheyenne camps and at the Fort.

*"I propose a simple trade,
Something fair and free,
I give you this calico,
You give that hide to me . . ."*

Between his heroics at Gettysburg and his disaster at Little Bighorn, George Armstrong Custer played a significant role in the in south-central Plains to the east and south of Bent's Fort. His arrival there as presented in the Opera is a plausible fiction that juxtaposes the Custer critiques dominating history and culture since the 1970's with the tragic hero Custer myths that prevailed in the years before that. Both sides of the colorful and careless Custer appear in full relief as he interacts with members of the tribe who will one day suffer so greatly at his hand.

*"Thunder and lightning over the land,
The War for the West is at hand :
You can test your mettle or settle a score
In the end you're just falling in love with war . . ."*

When the Civil War breaks out, William Bent's son George falls in with Confederate sympathizers in St. Louis and enlists in the calvary. He is captured and later released because of his father's Union connections but it is unsafe for him to live at Bent's Fort. He instead lives among his Cheyenne people with his new wife, Magpie, the daughter of the great Peace Chief, Black Kettle.

As the settler incursions grow larger and more threatening and the violence and retaliations grow in number and intensity, George's loyalties are increasingly divided.

*"There's something more important
Than a tooth for a tooth,
You can see it in the distant light
And it's beckoning you . . ."*

THE STORY

ACT 2

In a fictional device encompassing the scope and horror of things to come, George Bent's wife, Magpie has a dream, which she tells by way of a hauntingly beautiful song: she has seen a black wolf and a yellow-haired wolf roaming two separate river valleys. The imagery foreshadows the horrific actions of two army officers in separate events soon to come.

Ceran St. Vrain returns to Bent's Fort from Santa Fe with foreboding news of an uprising of Pueblo Indians encouraged by Spain against the Anglo-American interests on the plains. William Bent, meanwhile, returns to the fort with the usual mixed messaging of yet another treaty meeting between Plains Indians and the US government. Tensions and uncertainties are at a breaking point.

*"These new wolves eat,
When they are not hungry,
These crazy wolves drink,
When their throats are not dry . . ."*



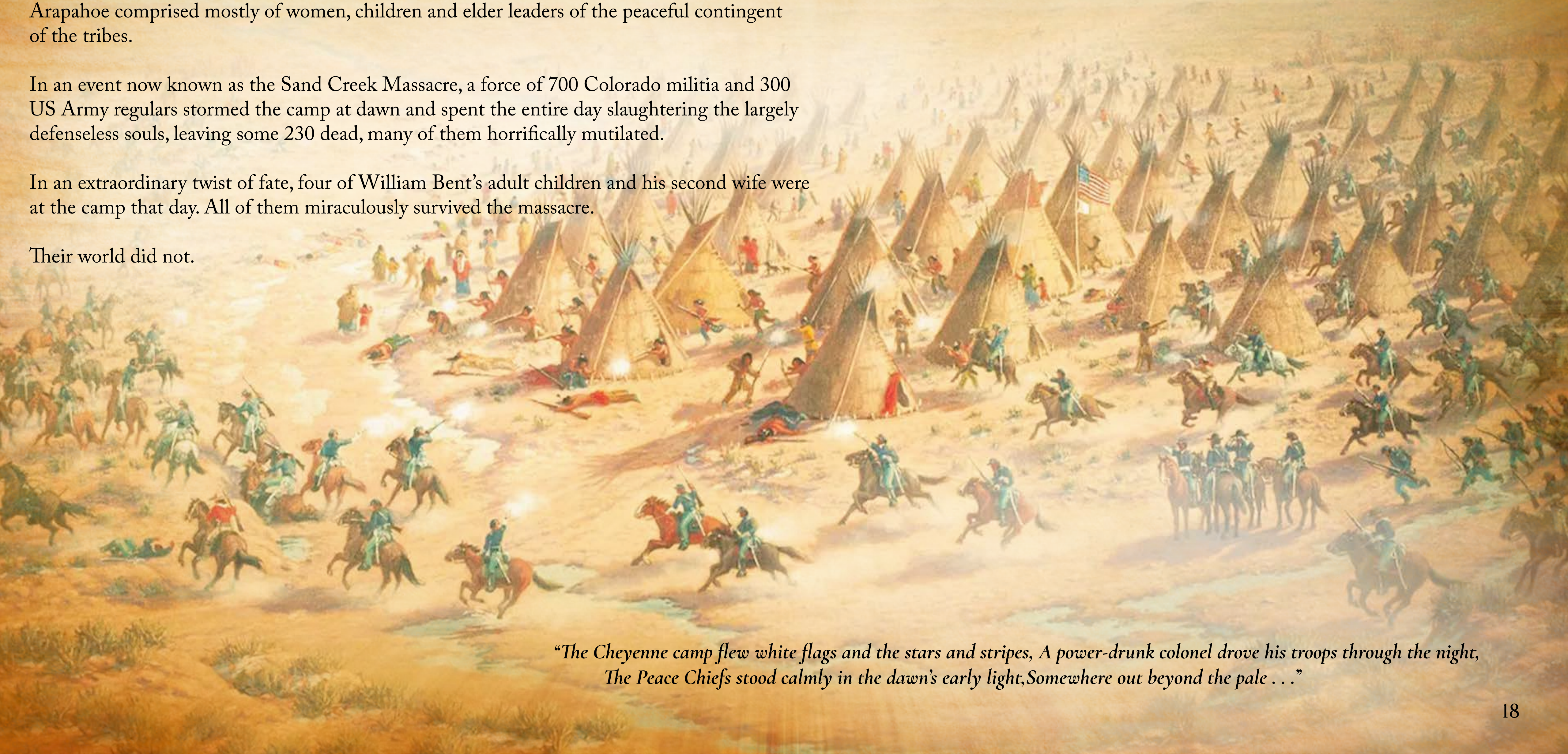
*Treaty
of
Confederation
Kiowa, Comanche and Apache
Tribes
Concluded at
Medicine Lodge Creek
October 21st. 1867.*

The strained harmony of the Bents' two worlds came to a cataclysmic end in the fall of 1864. An ambitious officer named Colonel John Chivington conspired with John Evans, the Territorial Governor of Colorado to attack a peaceful encampment of Northern Cheyenne and Arapahoe comprised mostly of women, children and elder leaders of the peaceful contingent of the tribes.

In an event now known as the Sand Creek Massacre, a force of 700 Colorado militia and 300 US Army regulars stormed the camp at dawn and spent the entire day slaughtering the largely defenseless souls, leaving some 230 dead, many of them horrifically mutilated.

In an extraordinary twist of fate, four of William Bent's adult children and his second wife were at the camp that day. All of them miraculously survived the massacre.

Their world did not.



*“The Cheyenne camp flew white flags and the stars and stripes, A power-drunk colonel drove his troops through the night,
The Peace Chiefs stood calmly in the dawn’s early light, Somewhere out beyond the pale . . .”*

ACT 3

In the final extended suite of the Opera, a lyrical showdown takes place among the Massacre's principal players and some of the Opera's other main characters. Chivington and a cadre of his men will arrive to gloat about his "great victory" only to be confronted by the contingent at the Fort.

William Bent's eldest son, George, will be joined by two other witnesses of the Massacre: a famed black scout named Jim Beckwourth and a US Army Sargent fittingly named Silas Soule, an officer present at the Massacre who ordered his platoon to refrain from the shooting and who later testified in the Army hearings where Chivington was excoriated. Each of these witnesses will plead their case against the cowardice and butchery of Chivington, as will the Spirit of the Four Winds and the Angel of the West.

The penultimate voices in the matter will be Black Kettle, the great Cheyenne Peace Chief who survived Sand Creek only to be killed by Custer's troops in a similar massacre in Oklahoma, and the spirit of White Antelope, the Arapaho Peace Chief who faced the first wave of Chivington's troops by standing in front of his lodge, arms folded, singing his death song.

ATTENTION!
INDIAN
FIGHTERS

Having been authorized by the Governor to raise a
Company of 100 Men
U. S. VOL CAVALRY!

Pay and Bounties the same as other U. S.
Volunteer Cavalry.

Apply at the first door East of Recorder's Office.

THIS MARKER IS THE
PROPERTY OF THE STATE OF COLORADO

SILAS S. SOULE

AT THIS LOCATION ON APRIL 23, 1865,
ASSASSINS SHOT AND KILLED 1ST
COLORADO CAVALRY OFFICER CAPT.
SILAS S. SOULE. DURING THE INFAMOUS
SAND CREEK MASSACRE OF NOVEMBER
29, 1864, SOULE HAD DISOBEYED
ORDERS BY REFUSING TO FIRE ON CHIEF
BLACK KETTLE'S PEACEFUL CHEYENNE
AND ARAPAHO VILLAGE. LATER, AT
ARMY HEARINGS, SOULE TESTIFIED
AGAINST HIS COMMANDER, COL. JOHN
M. CHIVINGTON, DETAILING THE
ATROCITIES COMMITTED BY
THE TROOPS AT SAND CREEK.
HIS MURDERERS WERE NEVER
BROUGHT TO JUSTICE.

ERECTED BY HISTORY COLORADO,
THE COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
FROM THE
DR. & MRS. J. N. HALL MARKER TRUST,
2010

These testimonies and ruminations will condemn and mourn the events at Sand Creek in a way that allows those events to stand in for the universal suffering of all the First Nations across the West and, for that matter, all of Americas.

EPILOGUE:

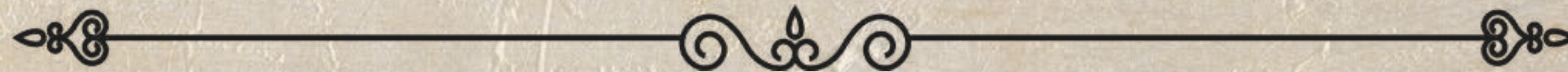
After the stage goes black at the end of the last scene, the film reel image reappears on the back screen. The motorcyclist wakes up from his coma. His vital signs are good. It's clear he's going to live. He stares into the light of his world as the final song begins. He lays his head back, closes his eyes and falls into what is now just a daydream. A montage of multi-cultural America from the last 150 years ensues, with the tragic and ugly interspersed with all that is beautiful and harmonious in the fledgling United States. The song is a long, Dylan-esque ballad that takes one final journey from the gateway to the West that is St. Louis to the lands around Bent's Fort and on to Santa Fe, the great desert beyond and finally over the mountains into California. The song ends with a gentle refrain posing a series of questions newly framed, it is hoped, by the Opera's tales of the great American West.

“What will you do, when your eyes run out of land?”

What will you do, to make a life right where you stand?

What will you do, in this broken promised land?”

THE BIGGER PICTURE



WEST OF THE JORDAN

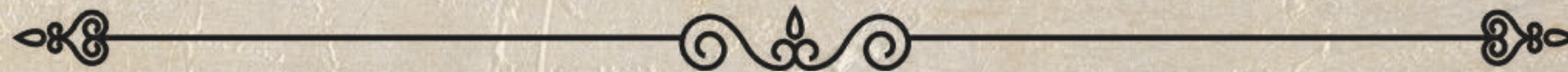
THE NATURAL SPLendor & MYTHIC LEGACY OF THE WEST

The focus on the history of the West fulfills just one third of the project's mission. Juxtaposed against the tragic sweep of the Opera's central storyline are the simple joys of ordinary lives and the stunning beauty, diversity and scale of the natural world in the American West.



Beyond even the clearest historical comprehension and deepest aesthetic appreciation, the third aspiration of the Opera is to explore the mythic essences of the West and the ways in which competing myths and legends have the power to affect history in the making.

59 PRODUCTIONS



THEATRICAL DESIGN
CASE STUDIES

THE LAST SHIP

“THE TECHNICAL SKILL OF THE DESIGNERS IS TRULY AMAZING”

- THE TELEGRAPH

THE LAST SHIP

NORTHERN STAGE, NEWCASTLE | UK TOUR, US TOUR

“59 Productions’ design is stunning, rendering the shipyard in all its terrible beauty” - The Stage

Sting’s musical, The Last Ship, returned to its home town of Newcastle for its opening in March 2018.

Re-written and re-designed for its UK premiere, the show was brought to life by the set and video designs of 59 Productions.

Set during the Thatcher years, this political and passionate musical tells the story of Gideon, a sailor returning home to Wallsend after 17 years away. He soon discovers the ship-building life he left behind in chaos, the yard is closing and no one knows what will come next. With the engine fired and pistons in motion, picket lines are drawn as foreman Jackie White and his wife Peggy fight to hold their community together in the face of the gathering storm.

The Last Ship opened at Northern Stage in March 2018 before embarking on a UK and US tour.

TYPE Stage Design

OPENING DATE March, 2018

LOCATION Northern Stage, Newcastle,
UK UK Tour 2018 - 2019
US Tour 2019 - 20

PROJECT SERVICES Set Design, Video Design, Sound Design, Lighting Design, Content Production, Animation, Technical Design, Producing, Sound and Video Programming

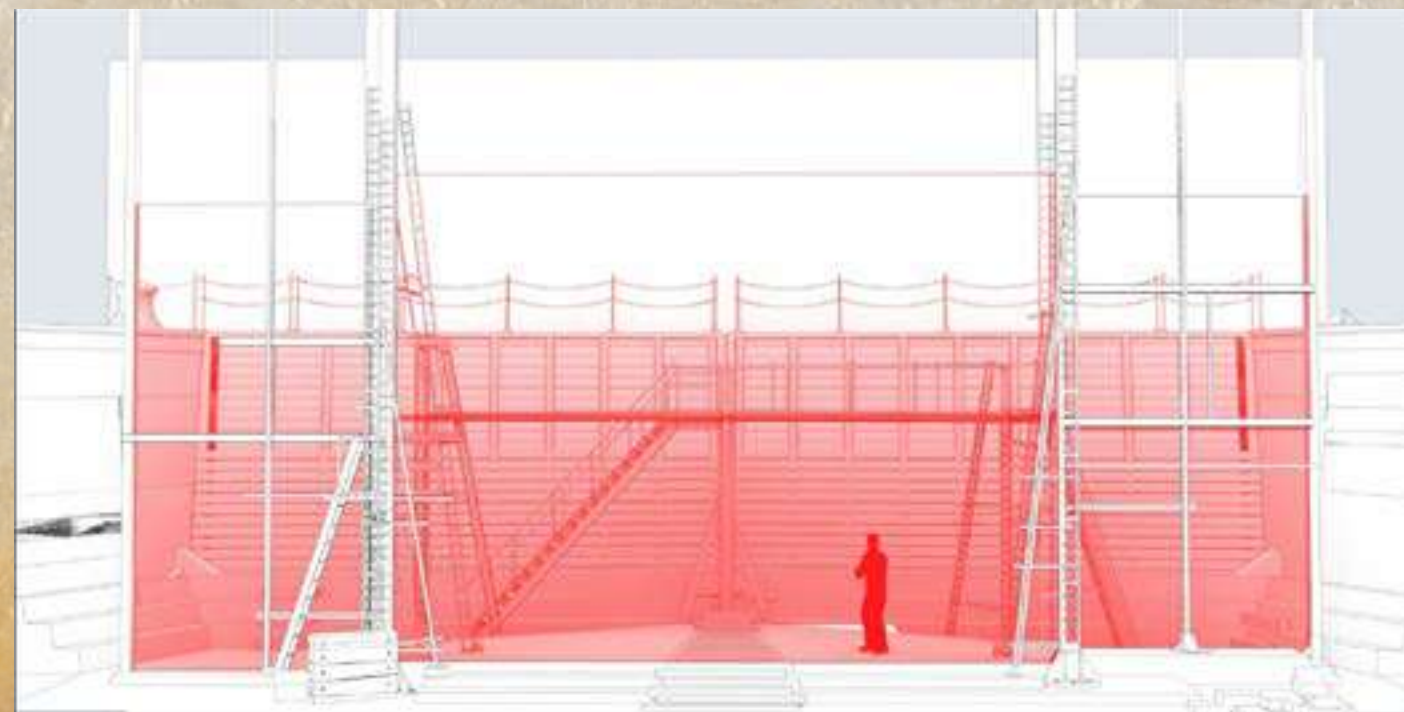
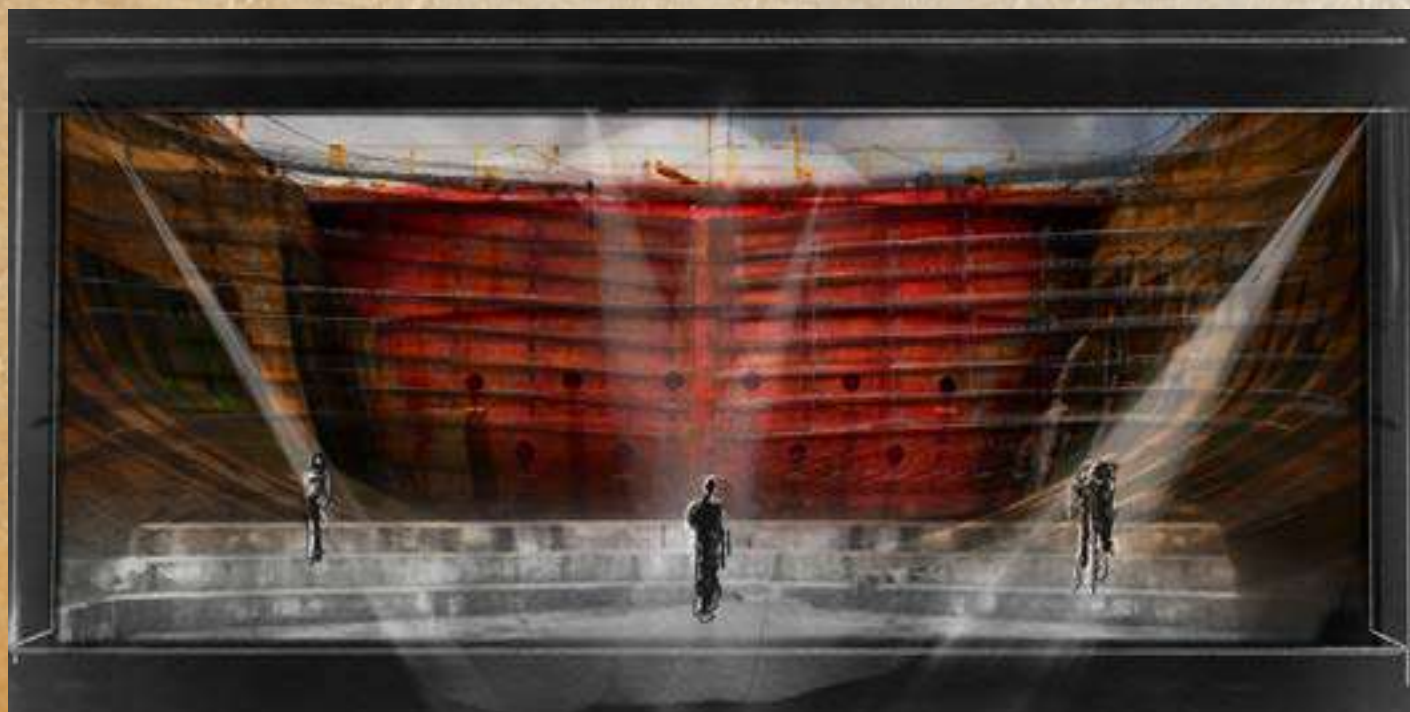
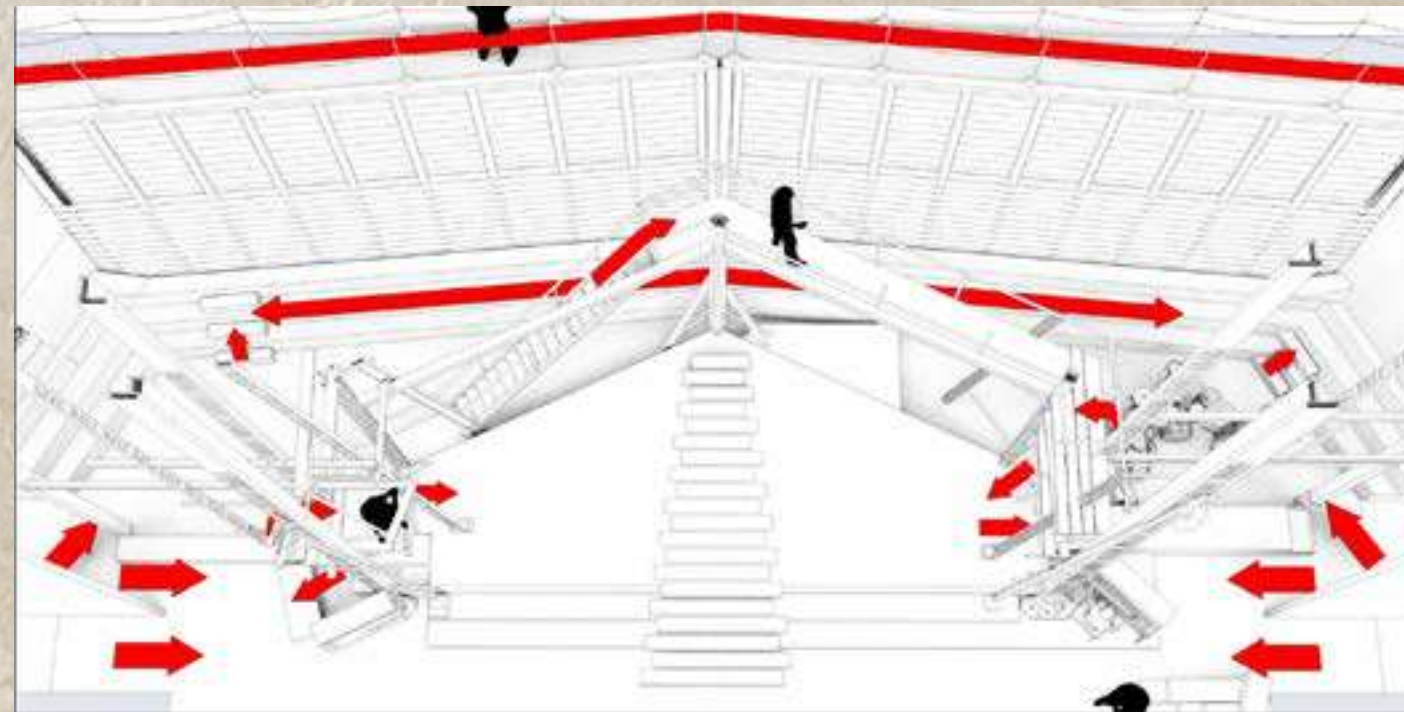
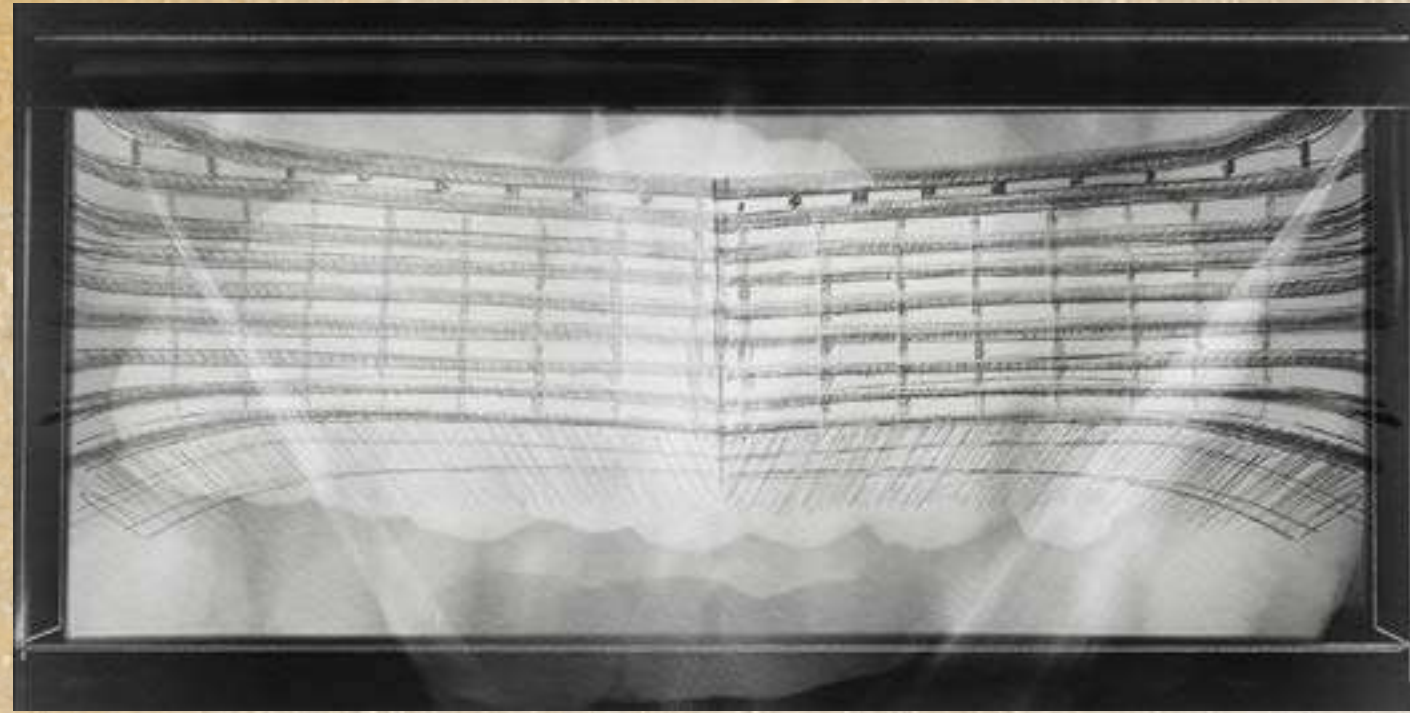


The Last Ship, Northern Stage, Newcastle, 2018.
Photos: Pamela Raith

The Last Ship, Prince of Wales, Toronto, 2019

THE LAST SHIP

STAGING & PROJECTION CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

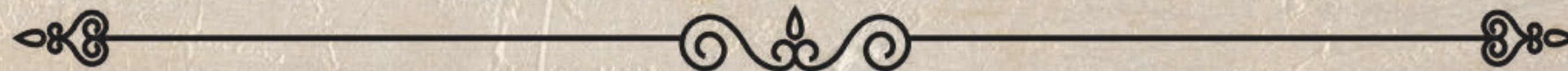


Initial Sketches

White Card Renders

Visualisations

59 PRODUCTIONS



INVISIBLE CITIES

INVISIBLE CITIES

A TANTALISING GLIMPSE OF AN INTANGIBLE TRUTH

**“BRUNEL MEETS DANTE IN THIS
SPELLBINDING SPECTACLE”**
- THE TELEGRAPH

INVISIBLE CITIES

MANCHESTER INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL, 59 PRODUCTIONS & RAMBERT

“A remarkable piece of work” - Financial Times

Zenobia, a city of joy. Beersheba, a celestial city of gold. Isadora, a city of promise, seduction and desire. City by unseen city, the young explorer conjures from the ether a vast and spectacular empire – all for the benefit of its emperor, his master, who may never get to see it for himself...

Leo Warner, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Lolita Chakrabarti, 59 Productions and Rambert brought to life a series of fantastical places in this world-premiere production.

Centred on the edgy relationship between Kublai Khan, the volatile head of a vast empire, and explorer Marco Polo, who must transcend a language barrier to describe it for him, this spellbinding mix of theatre, choreography, music, architectural design and projection mapping imagined a succession of alternative worlds – and re-imagined what is possible in live performance.

TYPE Stage Design

OPENING DATE July, 2019

LOCATION Manchester International Festival 2019 Brisbane Festival 2019

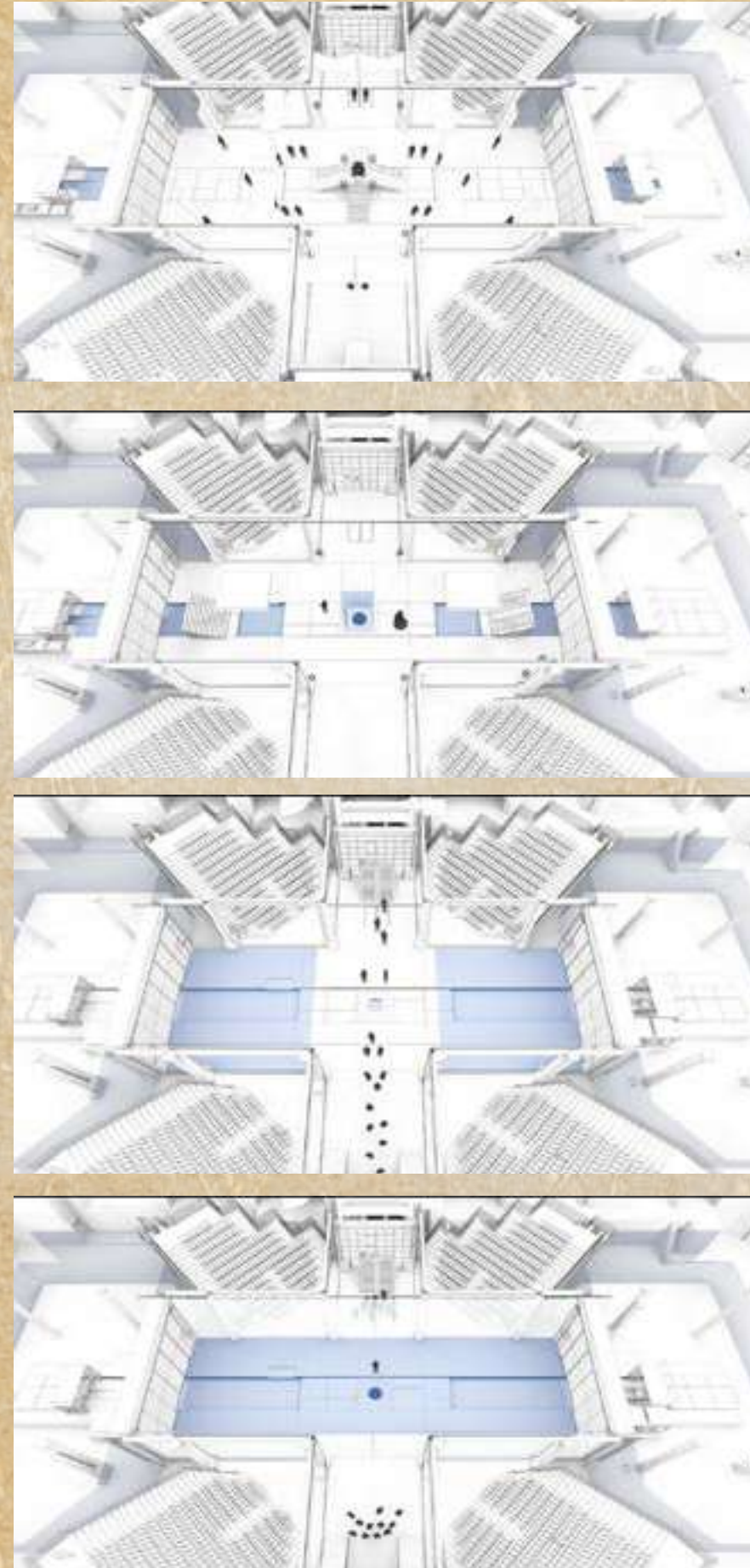
PROJECT SERVICES Direction, Set Design, Video Design, Sound Design, Prop Design, Lighting Design, Costume Design, Content Production, Animation, Producing, Technical Design, Sound & Video Programming



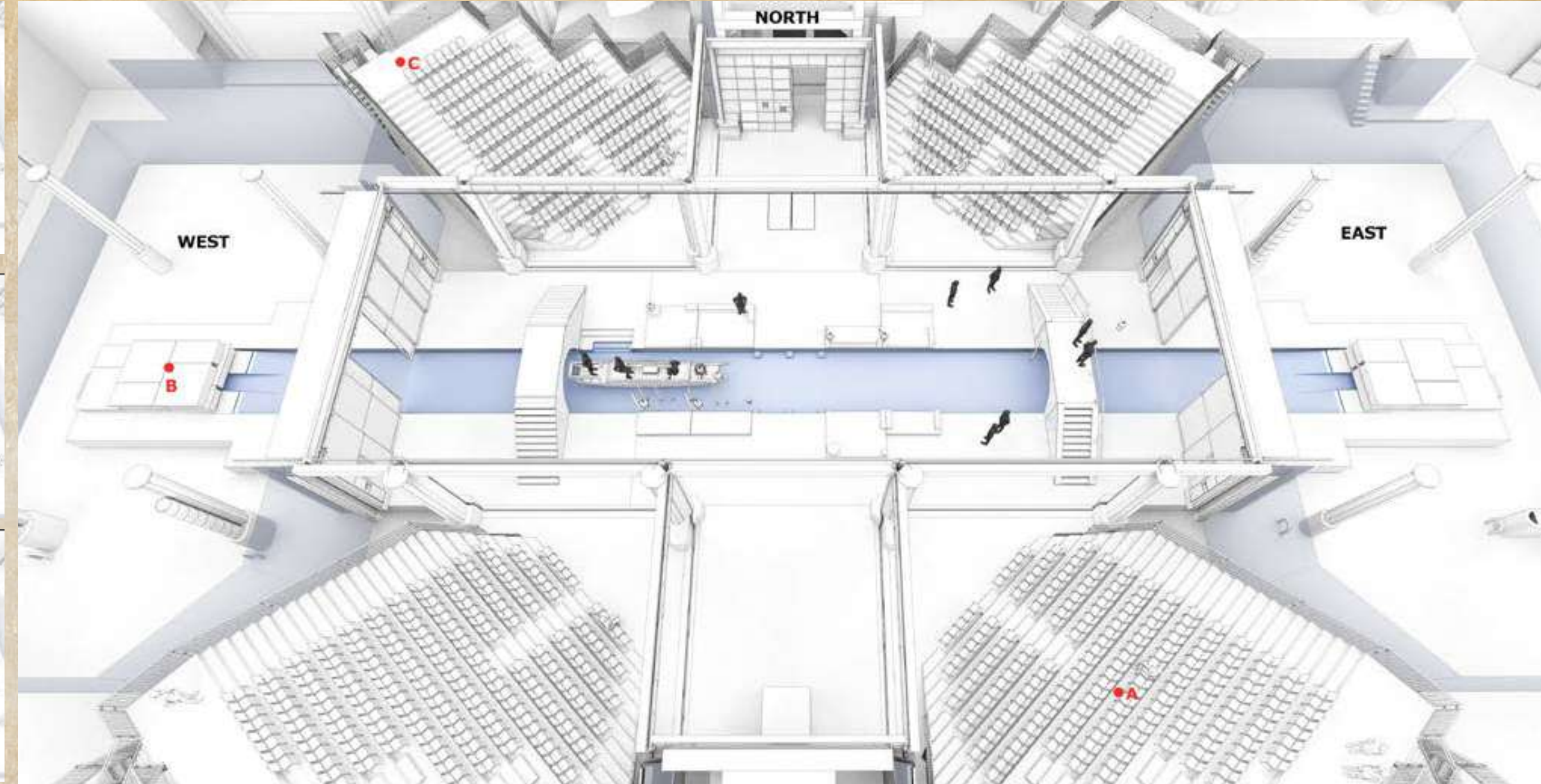
Invisible Cities,
Manchester International Festival, 2019

Invisible Cities,
Brisbane Festival, 2019 / Photos: Craig Wilkinson

Staging Progression



Aerial Overview



A: South-East Seating Block



B: From West Centre Stage



C: From North West Seating Block