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Tombstone without testosterone

Where were the womenfolk as the boys shot up the OK Corral? At the saloon, with plenty to say - as imagined in the new all-female stage musical "*I Married Wyatt Earp*."

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In *I Married Wyatt Earp*, the wife implied by the title is, as you might expect, the new musical's principal character. Don't conclude, however, that Mr. Earp himself plays a major role. Fact is, the legendary Westerner doesn't appear at all.

Indeed, although part of the show takes place in Tombstone, an Arizona silver-boom town where males vastly outnumbered females, when the musical premieres tomorrow at Bristol Riverside Theatre, there will be not a single (or married) man on stage. A bonanza for actresses, *I Married Wyatt Earp* has a cast of 11: women only.

An all-female western musical? *Annie Get Your Gun* had only one major gun-totin' gal. One reason for the female emphasis here is that the Tombstone scenes take place in 1881, during the celebrated gunfight at OK Corral.

As anyone who has seen any of the many movies made about it knows, that incident involved Wyatt Earp, his brothers Virgil and Morgan, and the gunslinging gambler Doc Holliday. While Wyatt and the Earp brothers are off settling their feud with the Clanton brothers, the women gather in the saloon. Besides wife-to-be Josie Marcus, then Earp's lover, they include Virgil's wife Allie; Wyatt's estranged wife, Mattie; Beth Earp (wife of Jim, a brother who did not participate in the gunfight); Beth's daughter Hattie; and Doc Holliday's mistress.

"The play centers on what is going on between the women and not so much on what's going on offstage," said writer Sheilah Rae, taking a break from a rehearsal at the Bristol theater. "Yes, we have a sense that the men are out there about to kill one other, but it's not really part of the action on stage."

The main reason for the all-female lineup is that it is central to what Rae - who conceived the show, wrote the lyrics, and cowrote the book with Thomas Edward West - sought to achieve. "I wanted a fresh way of telling the story [of the OK Corral] that hadn't been used already in the 53 movies we've seen about Wyatt Earp. I thought it might be interesting to approach it purely from the women's point of view.

"Women are always in the shadows in westerns, so I thought, wouldn't it be interesting for once if men were in the shadows, and women [conversed about] their experience of being in the West."

If the title *I Married Wyatt Earp* sounds familiar, that may be because of the 1983 television movie with that name, or the book upon which both the film and musical are loosely based. When *I Married Wyatt Earp* was published in 1976 by the Arizona University Press, it was touted as the memories of Josie Earp as compiled and footnoted by Glenn Boyer. However, after the authenticity of Boyer's source material was challenged in the 1990s, the university press redesignated the book as "creative nonfiction" and later stopped publishing it.

The book tells the story of Josephine Marcus, the strikingly attractive daughter of a wealthy, Jewish San Francisco merchant who at 18 ran away from home to join a tour of the new Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, HMS Pinafore. The tour stopped in Tombstone, where Josie first took up

with Sheriff John Behan, and then with Earp.

The two stayed together for 47 years, until Earp's death in 1929. She traveled with her gambler, saloon-keeper and petty-entrepreneur husband to gold strikes in Idaho and Alaska and other places where opportunity beckoned, until they settled in Los Angeles.

When she was elderly - she died in 1944 at 83 - "Josie would hold court in the Beverly Hills Hotel and tell the stories of their travels to whatever actors would listen to her," Rae said.

The play opens in the hotel, where Josie is visited by Virgil's widow, Allie, whom Josie has slapped with an injunction in an attempt to prevent her from publishing her memoirs. The action then switches back and forth between the hotel and Tombstone six decades earlier, as the women reminisce.

A former Broadway performer who appeared in the original productions of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Applause*, Rae developed a second career writing pop songs and advertising jingles before turning to writing for the stage. She has worked on several shows, most successfully on *Funny, You Don't Look Like a Grandmother*, which introduced Rae to Bristol Riverside when it was staged there two years ago.

Although she has written music, lyrics and dialogue, Rae said she had no desire to do it all on this show: "I like having partners, and I'm good at having partners. I wanted other people on this project."

Composer Michele Brouman has created a score that Rae describes as "Aaron Copland meets the Eagles and Nashville. It's a strongly American hybrid that melds pop and country with Gilbert and Sullivan and Victorian dance-hall thrown in for good measure."

With two time frames and so many women to deal with, Rae admitted the piece is dialogue-heavy, less a standard musical and "more like a play with songs."

At the center of that play is Josie Marcus Earp, whom Rae described as a woman who left "the strictures of the confined, Victorian heavy-velvet-drapes existence that she grew up in and stepped into an area where she felt she had room to breathe."

"She had to break out, and that alone intrigued me and drew me into the original research," Rae said. "She could be a schoolteacher or a prostitute or stay home and be a wife. None of those paths appealed to her, they didn't interest her at all."

Josie realized early, Rae said, that if she attached herself to a man "she could move around and do what she wanted. She was an adventurer, and here was this guy, Wyatt Earp, who was as big an adventurer as she."

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