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## Holy Cow: Staging Boucicault's The Shaughraun

Patrick Michael Finelli  
*University of South Florida, finelli@usf.edu*

Jason Winfield  
*University of South Florida, winfield@usf.edu*

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**HOLY COW: Staging Boucicault's *The Shaughraun*  
by Patrick M. Finelli and Jason Winfield**

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USITT  
315 South Crouse Avenue, Suite 200  
Syracuse, NY 13210  
tel: 800-93-USITT (800-938-7488)  
tel: 315-463-6463  
fax: 315-463-6525  
e-mail: [info@office.usitt.org](mailto:info@office.usitt.org)  
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# HOLY COW

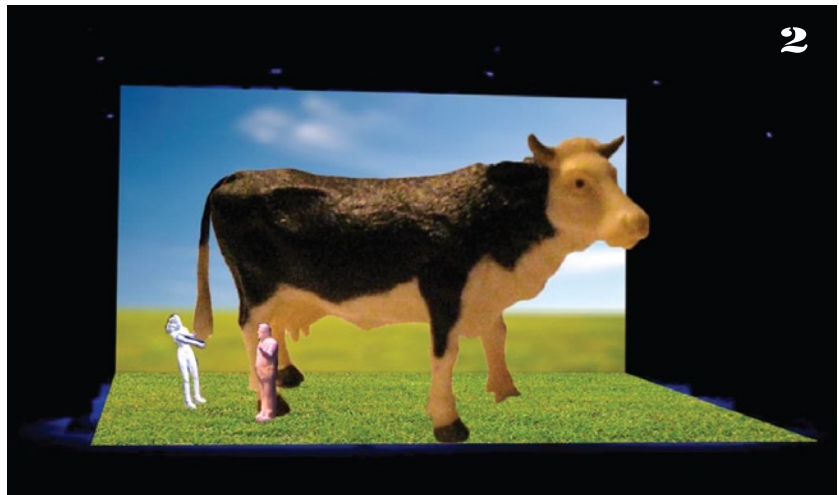
## Staging Boucicault's *The Shaughbraun*

Patrick Finelli and Jason Winfield



**I** Cow arrives at scene shop.

Three preliminary design images on PowerPoint.



To mark the twentieth anniversary of its British International Theatre Program (BRIT), the University of South Florida School of Theatre and Dance produced the Dion Boucicault melodrama *The Shaughbraun*. Directed by Olivier Award winner Malachi Bogdanov, Associate Artistic Director of the English Shakespeare Company, the production took a determinedly physical theater approach, in keeping with our commitment to vigorous, exciting, and challenging performance. Set design was by Bruce French, winner of the British Theatre Design Trust Award, costume design was by TheatreUSF faculty member Marilyn Bertch, and lighting design was by guest artist David Williams. The USF BRIT program was founded by Tampa donors Hinks and Elaine Shimberg along with Chichester Festival producers John and Lisle Gayle and Sir Cameron Macintosh. Past guest artists have included the director Edward Hall, the writer Ron Harwood, the actor Sir Donald Sinden, the film and theatre director Sam Mendes (at age twenty-five our youngest teacher) and dramatist Christopher Fry (ninety) our oldest.



### The Most Successful Dramatist of the Period

*The Shaughraun* premiered in New York in 1874, where it enjoyed enormous popular success. It tells the story of a wealthy Irishman wrongfully convicted of being a Fenian rebel and his shaughraun (vagabond) friend's efforts to help him. The play includes villains, daring escapes, double crosses, love at first sight, and damsels in distress, among other elements essential to melodrama. Dion Boucicault (b. 1820, d. 1890) was perhaps the most prolific and influential actor, playwright, producer, manager and American theatrical innovator of the nineteenth century. Boucicault actually founded the first American school of acting. Boucicault not only influenced the practices and conventions of his contemporaries in the theater, but he also brought important social and cultural issues of historical significance to the stage, such as race, slavery and political issues. Although many of Boucicault's plays contain serious social commentary, he was also a true entertainer. He delighted his audiences with elaborate stage sets, original musical scores, and exciting stage theatrics, such as real burning buildings and horse races. He brought melodrama and free adaptations of French popular stories and novels to the States, and thereby helped to solidify theater as the main form of entertainment for all classes on both sides of the Atlantic in the

late 1800s. After he had gained notoriety for his work, he began to incorporate Irish material into his original plays. The noted theatre historian Oscar Brockett called Boucicault, "The most successful dramatist of the period (1822-1890)."

Louise Thorndyke, who became Boucicault's third wife when he was sixty-four and she was twenty-one, inherited Boucicault's manuscripts and plays at his death in 1890. During the Depression, when Boucicault's play, *The Poor of New York*, was having a successful revival, she sold her collection to novelist Fitzhugh Green, who in turn sold it in 1956 to Jack Clay, Professor of Theatre at the University of South Florida. The University of South Florida purchased the Dion Boucicault collection in the 1960s from Professor Clay. Now the property of the Special Collections Department of the University of South Florida Tampa Campus Library, the collection is the most significant source of Boucicault material available in public hands in U.S. institutions.

### An Important and Accessible Archive

The Boucicault Archive at USF contains unique materials of tremendous importance to scholars of the nineteenth century, whether their interests lie in the American theatre or the European, for Boucicault is one of the few figures of the

period to have stature and pertinence in both. The University of South Florida (Libraries Digitization Center (LDC)) has digitized much of the largest public collection of original hand-written plays and related materials. This is a matter of considerable importance to those of us who know how easily fire, or earthquake, or other natural or political disaster, can wipe out irreplaceable materials.

The Boucicault collection consists of approximately 800 items, including printed and manuscript play scripts, sides, stage directions, letters, prompt books, photographs and musical scores. The material spans his career from 1843 (*A Fallen Angel*, produced in London, Box #1) to 1887 (*Fin McCool*, Box #13). The collection includes his own French translations and other work from the years 1844 to 1848 when he lived in France while mastering French romantic drama and melodrama. The collection includes three promptbooks and many pictures from *The Shaughraun*, one showing Boucicault as Conn and six other photos. Promptbook #1 contains the printed script with handwritten notes and markings. The handwriting may be from four different people. Some notes appear to be in Boucicault's handwriting. The first production of *The Shaughraun* was staged at Wallack's Theatre at Broome Street and Broadway in New York.

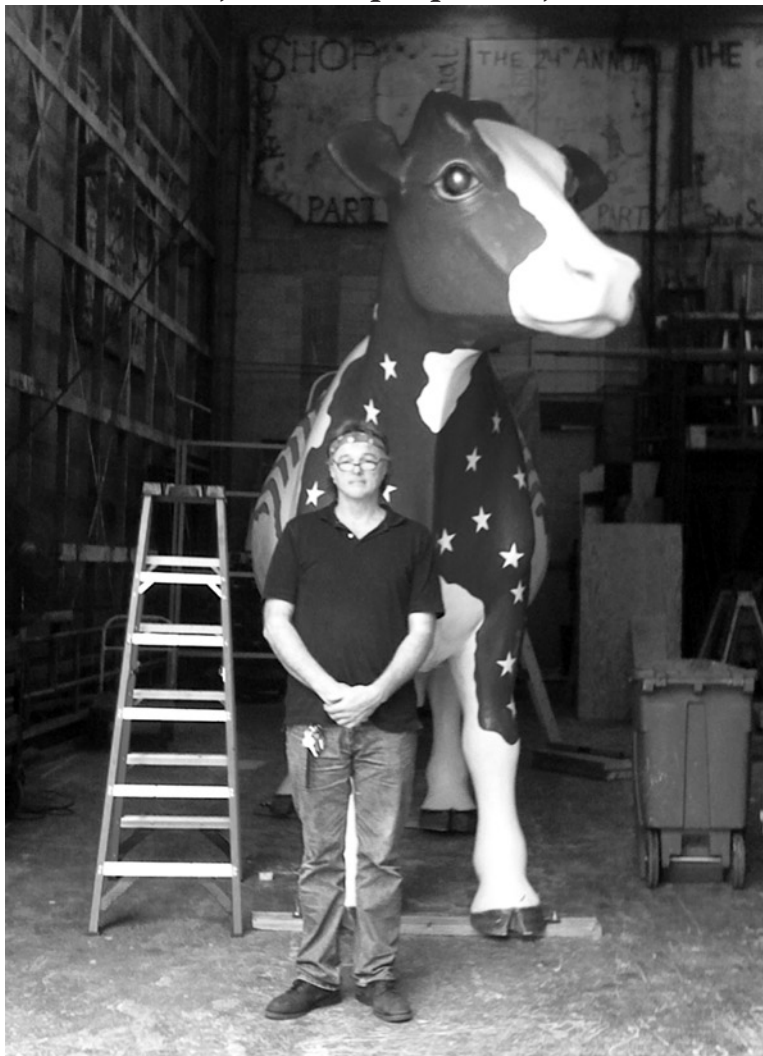


**“I was sure that we did not have the ability to fabricate the cow from the ground up in our facilities. But, if a large fiberglass cow could be purchased, we could make this design work.”**

The paper that the material is written on is brittle and must be handled delicately. To preserve the collection's integrity, the materials may currently only be accessed on a very limited basis through the USF Tampa Campus Library Rare Books Department. The LDC staff has developed a user-friendly, easily searchable website specifically for the extensive Dion Boucicault collection. LDC staff has posted scanned and digitally repaired and enhanced original paper materials onto the website, including exact color digital reproductions of the original materials. A small percentage of the material in the collection was completely unpublished; in accordance with U.S. copyright law, these materials were placed on the Boucicault website for publication after they entered the public domain on 1 January 2003. The vast majority of the material has been published and therefore, copyright restrictions do not apply.

This collection is very important for live theater troupes to access, because it contains the original lighting directions, stage sets, musical scores and costumes. Even for Boucicault's plays that have been published and are generally available, his personal annotations, changes and revisions, sides and prompt books are generally not included. These materials complete the play script and add a richness that the playwright originally intended to be a part of his productions that theater troupes, directors and actors may access online.

**G Mike Mathis, Scene Shop Supervisor, is 6'2" tall.**



### **Building the Cow**

As the fall semester ended, planning began for our BRIT production. By midterm the questions were piling up from students and faculty about the guest artists, their roles in the production, design time line, and the most often, “When will we see the design, what does it look like?” With an eye toward an 18 February opening, the initial visit of the director, designer and the London program coordinator was scheduled by e-mail for 19 November. Mr. French got straight to the point. “Are you capable of doing fiberglass? If not we can use papier-mâché? I have this idea we can talk about later,” he said rather quickly, “Can we have a look at the stage?” We toured our main stage, a proscenium house with 552 seats and a stage approximately 44 ft. x 36 ft. with a counterweight fly system and a trapped floor. As we walked the space, we wondered how our designer planned on addressing the needs of this script that calls for multiple locations

ranging from a cottage (fig. 11) and jail (fig. 4) to cliff tops (fig. 7) and a ship's dock (fig. 5). When the meeting started, the anxiety could be felt. Then we were astonished to hear, “We are thinking about a very large (25 ft. long x 12ft. tall) gull-winged cow on a turntable. Can you do that?” This question was accompanied by a PowerPoint slide show revealing the different configurations and positions of this bovine concept, including a jail break that happened through a trap door beneath the tail. We scheduled a Bauprobe (technical rehearsal) for the following Tuesday to determine the desired size of the cow. At the same time, the technical director, Jason Winfield, began searching online for a supplier that could provide an adequately gigantic cow.

Winfield described how he approached the problem: I was sure that we did not have the ability to fabricate the cow from the ground



up in our facilities. But, if a large fiberglass cow could be purchased, we could make this design work. I had communicated with a few manufacturers, including the company which makes the famous Chick-Fil-A restaurant cows, and determined that the cost of a brand new cow cast from an existing mold would be \$14,000-\$30,000. This was out of the question. However, I was convinced that an affordable second-hand cow could be located. But where do you find one of those? Craigslist, E-Bay, restaurant supply auctions and ranch supply companies were researched with some success, but with no solution. Finally, Fiberglass Animals, Shapes and Trademarks (FAST) said it had a cow it normally rented, which could be purchased for an amount that didn't break our budget.

The next step was showing the designer image of the available statue assuring him it would be large enough to facilitate the visual he was hoping achieve. Armed with the dimensions of the rental cow, the shop staff quickly prepared a large sawhorse dressed as a cow for the Bauprobe the following afternoon. Our biggest challenge was the available cow was a touch more than half the size (16 ft. long by 10 ft. tall) of the designer's concept images (25 ft. long x 12 ft. tall) As it turned out, the smaller was a better dimension for our stage, a rather low proscenium, 18 ft., makes for a letterbox feeling and restricted the playing space atop the larger shape. The decision was made.

The next hurdle was to get the ten-foot-tall discounted former rental cow to from FAST's warehouse in Sparta, Wisconsin, to Tampa, Florida, 1,434 miles away. The structural integrity of the sculpture allowed it to be carriage-bolted to a flatbed trailer and transported easily at 70 mph. FAST would deliver at \$1.50 per mile at an estimated cost of \$2,151. Fortunately, they were able to give us a discount since they had deliveries in Tennessee and Alabama and would only charge for mileage from their last scheduled delivery in Huntsville, Alabama. Winter in Wisconsin made the estimated delivery date the eighth of December. Logistics seemed set, but we hit another snag in the State University purchasing system. The expense had been rejected as frivolous expenditure during economic hardship by our account supervisor. We had to petition the Provost and justify that the enormous cow was a legitimate expense for our production program. Since the school mascot is a Brahma Bull, we argued that the cow would be dressed in a tutu and placed on a float for homecoming to both promote our College of the Arts and to display school spirit. We received the go-ahead just as a blizzard struck the northern Midwest.

Having dealt with the exigencies of university policy and the wrath of mother nature, delivery was delayed to the following week. But finally, she was delivered on 13 December and quickly loaded into the shop. (figs. 1 and 6)

We had only a rough idea of the how the

cow would be used and had to wait until January and the arrival of the designer and director. I knew we needed gull-winged doors and an escape hatch in the hind quarters, but didn't know the size of the openings. The interior needed to accommodate actors and costumes, so I removed the tail and used the opening as a starting point for a reciprocating saw, cutting a hatch large enough to pass through in order to gain access and ventilate the interior of the structure. That gave me a better idea of what we were getting into. The side walls of the casting ranged between 3/8" and 5/8", the interior surface was fairly smooth and could be easily made "actor friendly" for the production. The next step was to address the gull-winged doors and structural changes after the removal of both sides of the cow. Unfortunately, the designer was unable to be in residence and began to doubt that the cow was large enough. This started a series of Photoshop exercises in order to communicate the size relationship to original design concept. Ultimately, the assistant designer was able to agree to the size of the cow and help to set the gull-wing portal sizes. Next came the cutting of the doors. Armed with a circular saw, respirator, and a body suit, I began the process. After one side was removed, I projected the corners to the opposing side through the cow with a level drilled through the side wall and connected the dots on the exterior with a string and level. The process was tedious due to the undulating

**The side walls of the casting ranged between 3/8" and 5/8", the interior surface was fairly smooth and could be easily made "actor friendly" for the production.**

and asymmetrical form. Satisfied with the portal sizes, our next task was installing a playing platform and reinforcing the top of the cow to make sure it could be used as an acting surface.

Creating an acting area on the top of the cow was a challenge. After cutting a 4 ft. x 3 ft. opening on either side of the cow, the integrity was compromised. We reinforced it by adding a plywood spine that was the length of the opening and custom fit ribs that sandwiched the added spine. The side of the ribs was matched to the height of the opening creating a line that traversed the interior of the cow. This allowed a flat, coplanar surface that would aid in the creation of a hinge that could accomplish the desired gull winged design. Finally, I had a flat surface. As this was being fit, another crew started building the acting platform inside the animal by aligning 2 ft. x 4 ft. supports three quarters of an inch below the opening at each end of the side openings and one 2-1/2 ft. from the rear support. This was in preparation for the belly hatch. Actors did in fact have to enter from a 28 inch by 16 inch hole cut in the lowest point of the cow passing through a sliding door in the interior acting area platform. Space was becoming increasingly rare and more valuable as we continued. We still needed to cut a small window in one hip, reattach the hind end, figure out a method of attaching and removing the tail *a vista*, and locate an access hatch area to pass to the top of the cow from inside. The small



8

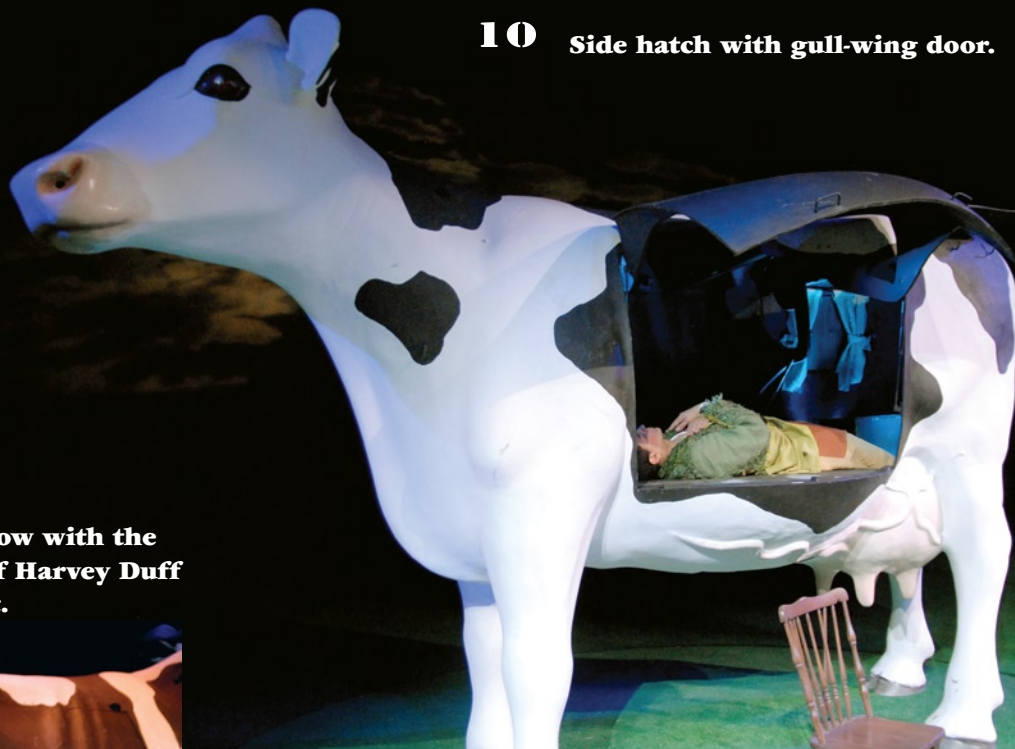
Jail Break



9



## 10 Side hatch with gull-wing door.



## 11 Small window with the character of Harvey Duff peering out.



issues were complicated by the organic shape of the subject we were carving. The support ribs along the spine offered a perfect attachment point for hinge rotation mounting points. Since the support ribs are perpendicular to the door opening, aligning the pivot points for the fore and aft hinge was actually quite simple. Once the holes were placed we then began the layout and crafting of the custom hinge.

We used Lauan plywood for a mock-up since the soft, stranded material is lighter and more flexible than other types of plywood and relatively inexpensive. We began by marking a circle at the shortest clearance area. Then

we created an arm that could have optimum contact with the door surface while clearing the exterior shell of the cow in order to allow for maximum travel. This was complicated by the curved surface forcing the hinge to travel 60 to 70 degrees in order to appear as if it were open at 45 degree angle. After a bit of trial and error we arrived at a suitable shape and build it with 3/4-inch plywood and custom fit each hinge to the unique contours of the cow. We now had functioning hinges and needed to install a mechanism that would allow safe easy usage by actors during the show (fig. 10). This was achieved with automotive hatchback lift

window (fig. 11) was not a structural concern and was easily created. As for the back end, the moment it was to be used in the play was a jail break with fog and sound effects; a quick release of the hatch was required. This was functionally developed with a wooden substructure and a slide latch that could be operated from inside the set. The top access hatch was small enough and did not interfere with the playing space on top of the cow enabling it to be cut out with minimal effect to the structure. Simple cabinet hinges were bolted through the fiberglass in order to make the hatch operable. Our next major concern became the gull-winged doors on either side of the cow. The weight of the doors, the interior space and the ease of operation all required careful attention. The



## 12 Cody under the 12-inch platform to lubricate the caster.

**...an exceptional opportunity to learn advanced stagecraft techniques in order to integrate a huge cow into the scenic action.**

cylinders. Once the appropriate location was established these worked like a charm. The cow was finished and ready for technical rehearsals.

While the cow was being prepared, our crew was also working on a 12 in. deck to cover our existing stage (40 ft. x 32 ft.) and installing a 16-foot diameter turntable in the center at the same height. The turntable was powered by a replication of the compact manual winch created by Loren Schreiber at San Diego State University which he exhibited at the 2006 USITT Conference & Stage Expo in Louisville, KY. The load-in went extremely well and worked fine until a single wheel became stuck and made an annoying and distracting squeak. An adventurous and slender member of the student crew volunteered to crawl under the turntable to apply WD40 and the problem was fixed (fig. 12).

The production of *The Shaughbraun* was an artistic success. It also provided the students with an exceptional opportunity to learn advanced stagecraft techniques in order to integrate a huge cow into the scenic action. Although the play is basically a bourgeois melodrama, the performance featured physical comedy inspired by the massive bovine set piece. Captain Molineux nearly stole the show as the foppish British officer, but Conn (The Shaughran) and Harvey Duff also had the audience laughing uncontrollably as they moved

in, around and on top of the cow, the real star of the show. The scenography and directorial choices elevated the humor and whimsy of the nineteenth-century comedy for our twenty-first-century collegiate audience (figs. 8 and 9). From cottage interior to county jail, our bovine sculpture satisfied the needs of the production, enhanced the story telling and offered a challenge that we accepted enthusiastically. The result was a wonderful, if irreverent, experience that the students and production team at the University of South Florida will remember for a long time. All that remains now is to fabricate

a rather large tutu and put her on a float for homecoming. Go Bulls! ❖

*Dr. Patrick Finelli, Professor at the University of South Florida in the School of Theatre and Dance, has been a member of USITT since 1981. He is the author of the textbook, Sound for the Stage, numerous journal articles, and software reviews.*

*Jason Winfield is faculty Technical Director for TheatreUSF and a member of the USITT Conference Committee, serving as co-coordinator of special events.*

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