

More Than Petticoats

Inspired by the book
More Than Petticoats: Remarkable California Women
by Erin H. Turner

written for stage by
Doug Brook

with
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Joanne Engelhardt, Jenny Hollingworth,
Leslie Hardy Tamel, and Irene Trapp

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The Tabard Theatre Company
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PREVIEW SCRIPT

For the full script, or production/rights inquiries, contact doug@brookwrite.com

PROLOGUE

Newspaper headlines or quotes are projected in turn as the related **WOMAN** is spotlighted, each in different parts of the stage. Nineteenth century women are announced by a period **NEWSBOY**. Twentieth century women are announced by a period Radio Announcer, preferably in voice-over.

(Slide: "Only trust me, and go!")

NEWSBOY

Extra! Extra! First California expedition opens state to country. Extra! Jessie Frémont ensures expedition succeeds! Extra!

(Slide: Only Chinese Woman Voter in History (Note: SF Examiner, May 15, 1912))

RADIO ANNOUNCER

In San Francisco news, Tye Leung, the government interpreter at the Angel Island Immigration Center, became the first Chinese woman ever to cast a vote.

(Slide: Former Slave Refused Service on Streetcar)

TEACHER

Mary Ellen Pleasant was not allowed on a streetcar, three years after the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. She was part of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War.

(Slide: "My buildings will be my legacy")

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Julia Morgan, instrumental in rebuilding San Francisco after the great earthquake, shunned publicity again today upon completion of the latest phase of her largest design, Hearst Castle. America's first independent woman architect...

(Slide: "Shoot me if you dare!")

NEWSBOY

Extra! Modoc Indian interpreter warned of attack! Extra! Toby Riddle warned of murders planned by her tribe during peace talks. Extra!

(Slide: "How did it happen? How could we?")

RADIO ANNOUNCER

The U.S. Army today impounded Dorothea Lange's photographs of Japanese-American internment camps in California, deeming them critical of post-Pearl Harbor policy. The award-winning photographer, who captured the Great Depression in such pictures as "Migrant Mother"...

(Slide: "No man can be stronger than his destiny")

NEWSBOY

Extra! City edition! Mary Austin's "The American Rhythm" released to bookstores. Extra! Feminist playwright and desert lyricist captures turn-of-the-century society in words. Extra!

(Light stays on **JESSIE FREMONT**, all others disappear in darkness.)

FRÉMONT 1 (1843)

Projection: 1843, St. Louis, Missouri

JESSIE

(to audience) As a young girl I was called a tomboy, and never had an untorn dress. I grew up in Missouri but not like the other girls did. And not just because I was a senator's daughter. At seventeen I married without my parents' blessing. Parental approbation means little to me. And my life became even more interesting when I was eighteen...

(**DE ROSIER**, a French Canadian explorer, enters.)

DE ROSIER

Madame Frémont. I am pleased to join your husband in his expedition to the West Coast.

JESSIE

And we are pleased you could join the group, monsieur De Rosier.

DE ROSIER

Is it true what I heard, that you helped plan this expedition?

JESSIE

Certainly. I have assisted him and coordinated his correspondence.

DE ROSIER

Most impressive for a woman of your high station.

JESSIE

For a woman of any station, I should think. I cannot join the expedition due to the young age of our children.

DE ROSIER

Your husband's report on the West from his previous expedition, which I now assume had your hand in it as well, was the best, most accurate of reports. Many have followed its words to Oregon. No doubt many will follow this next one to California as well.

JESSIE

No doubt. Monsieur, when you go to join the expedition, please take this letter with you.

(**JESSIE** hands **DE ROSIER** a sealed letter.)

DE ROSIER

I will bring this important document to him at once.

JESSIE

Oh, it is merely a letter I have written... But it is about a vital family matter. I want it delivered without loss of time. Speak of this letter to no one, not even of its existence.

DE ROSIER

Absolument, Madame Frémont. May I report to the colonel that you and his children are well?

JESSIE

You may. Now please, make haste.

DE ROSIER

Au revoir, Madame Frémont.

(**DE ROSIER** exits. **JESSIE** picks up Lily, her infant daughter, from a crib.)

JESSIE

Oh, my Lily. Your father will never see the real letter from Washington, just mine. They question the howitzer he requested for the expedition's protection. They ordered him to report to Washington, but if he does they will delay him indefinitely. The expedition to California would never happen. If he knew of the order, he would report, so nobody will ever see it. I simply wrote, "Do not lose a day, but start at once. I cannot tell you the reason but you must go. Only trust me and go."

(**JESSIE** puts Lily back in the crib, which disappears as the lights change.)

FRÉMONT 2 (1847)

JESSIE addresses the audience.

JESSIE

He trusted me, and went. The expedition was a great success. It opened California to the nation, which would have never happened if I sent him the order to report to Washington. The next time he went even farther down into California. There were difficulties... a battle with the Modoc tribe, and the Mexican-American War. But California grew quickly, and greater difficulties awaited John when he finally returned to Washington a few years later...

(Projection of the White House as it appeared in 1847, with a caption nothing the year. **JESSIE** and **JOHN FREMONT** are in a hallway outside a courtroom. **JOHN** is in dress uniform.)

JOHN

Jessie, it is hard to know which is more beautiful: California, or how you described it in your account of the expedition.

JESSIE

Oh, I merely scribbled down what you told me of it.

JOHN

You did more than that. It is a gift of nature that the land lives up to the grand words you brought to it. When did you start to write so?

JESSIE

It is simply my small contribution to your ventures.

JOHN

Your small contribution? You contribute more than anyone.

JESSIE

Your ambition must inspire me. I was very proud of your declaration of California's independence.

JOHN

It was necessary and inevitable to declare California independent from Mexico. The war with them was continuing with no end in sight.

JESSIE

Will the declaration still be honored after this court martial?

JOHN

It must be, regardless of my fate. The deed is done, and it was for the good.

JESSIE

But Commodore Stockton had named you military governor of California.

JOHN

Yes, but he is navy and I am army. And General Kearney wanted to be governor himself, not to have a sailor name an army subordinate instead.

JESSIE

He was jealous of you. Your loyal men have learned from this not to trust a General of the Army any more than they would trust a revengeful Apache!

JOHN

(dryly, lightly) I hope my loyal men lose that sentiment if I am someday a general. (serious) Jessie, he is my commanding officer and ordered me to relinquish the governorship to him. I did not do so.

JESSIE

You were in the right.

JOHN

I disobeyed his direct order.

JESSIE

No fair, rational man would find fault unless it served his purposes.

JOHN

At least my speedy trial will actually be speedy, thanks to you. Your appeal to President Polk on my behalf was a brave and noble act.

JESSIE

Do not suppose that I lightly interfere in a matter properly belonging to men. If he allowed your foes to delay this trial, you would have been tried in the press. Convicted before a jury even assembled.

JOHN

Do you think your father would approve of me now?

JESSIE

No. The great Senator Thomas Hart Benton would disapprove of our marriage now as much as ever. But he might approve of your accomplishments in California.

JOHN

Jessie, I still might be convicted. What then?

JESSIE

We will press on, no matter the verdict. I am with you, and the California you opened up to our nation.

JOHN

That we opened up.

JESSIE

That we have and will continue to serve without consideration of self and without compromising our principles.

(Blackout.)

TRANSITION 1 (1848-50)

Projection indicates 1848, shows Sutter's Mill or otherwise depicts mined gold.

NEWSBOY

Extra! Extra! Gold found at Sutter's Mill! Extra! Entire region expected to yield a mother lode.

(**WOMAN** appears across stage, gets paper from **NEWSBOY** as he passes and exits.)

WOMAN

(displeased) Incredible. All workers, especially Chinese immigrant workers, welcome and needed to work in mines thought to hold unprecedented gold deposits.

(**MAN 1** enters as **SHE** talks to herself while reading. Upon hearing the end, **MAN 1** rushes to her, steals newspaper.)

MAN 1

(ecstatic) I knew it!!!

(**MAN 1** rushes off to prospect for gold, reading the newspaper as he goes.)

WOMAN

(yells to man) What did you know? (to herself) Every lunatic in the state is going to rush up there. If the rest of the continent hears of this, the state will be flooded with fools.

(**WOMAN** exits. Projection changes to indicate 1850, shows seal or flag of California once it became a state. **NEWSBOY** enters opposite.)

NEWSBOY

Late edition! California 31st state! California enters Union as free state. Late edition!

(**MAN 2** and two **WOMEN** appear across stage. **WOMAN A** and **MAN 2** each get paper from **NEWSBOY** as he passes and exits.)

WOMAN A

(reading paper) No slavery?!

MAN 2

(bigot; reading paper) Henry Clay offers Compromise - No Slavery in D.C.! Congress enacts national Fugitive Slave Law.

WOMAN B

What does that mean?

MAN 2

Cain't ya read?

WOMAN A

(reading) A slave entering California is still a slave, and the state government has to return that runaway to its owner.

MAN 2

This ain't good.

(**WOMEN** look quizzically.)

WOMAN B

What isn't good? We don't offend the slave states because we return any who come here. And we don't make slavery worse by having it here ourselves.

MAN 2

'Til Californi' got in the mix, the Union was balanced - slave-holdin' and not. Now with Californi' a "free state", there's gonna be trouble.

WOMAN B

For heaven's sake! What kind of trouble?

MAN 2

Them boys in the South ain't gonna stand for their "peculiar institution" bein' challenged like this. You just wait and see.

(Blackout.)

PLEASANT 1 (1849)

TEACHER appears. **SHE** is teaching a fourth grade class about California history in 1965, to the audience.

TEACHER

Mary Ellen Pleasant was a civil rights activist a long time before anyone was known as one. (beat, hearing a “question”) What was she like? She was an imperious presence - a bossy, authoritative woman -- always standing proud. She had a dominating mind and persuaded everyone around her to do what she wanted. (beat.) What did she think of what she did? There are very few of Mary Ellen's own words easily found today, except for an interview with her in 1901, when she was eighty-seven years old...

(**INTERVIEWER** appears. **HE** is in 1901 and addresses an unseen Pleasant in another direction away from **TEACHER**.)

INTERVIEWER

I am grateful for this interview. Now, Mammy Pleasant...

TEACHER

That was the interviewer's first mistake. She cut him off and said, (as Pleasant) “I don't like to be called mammy by everybody. Put that down.”

(**INTERVIEWER** puts that down, continuing to react to the invisible Pleasant as **TEACHER** talks. As **TEACHER** quotes Pleasant, she takes on a different manner and addresses **INTERVIEWER** until she's done. **HE** keeps looking out at Pleasant, not at **TEACHER**.)

TEACHER

(to Pleasant) “I'm not Mammy to everybody in California. I got a letter today from a minister in Sacramento. It was addressed to Mammy Pleasant. I wrote back to him on his own paper that my name was Mrs. Mary E. Pleasant. I wouldn't waste any of my paper on him. The letter wasn't in the house fifteen minutes. I sent it right back to him unread. Between you and me, I don't care anything about it, but they shan't do it - they shan't nickname me at my age.” (about **INTERVIEWER**, still as Pleasant:) If he didn't have better sense he should have had better manners...

INTERVIEWER

When did you first arrive in San Francisco?

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