

PONTINE THEATRE PRESENTS

A WHITE HERON

BASED ON THE STORY BY SARAH ORNE JEWETT



New Hampshire
State Council on the **Arts**

Pontine Theatre is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts.

PONTINE THEATRE
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A WHITE HERON

Based on the story by Sarah Orne Jewett

*Created and performed by
Greg Gathers & Marguerite Mathews*

*Dramaturgy & direction, Marguerite Mathews
Production design, Greg Gathers
Video direction & editing, Pontine Theatre
Cameraman & sound engineer, Jeffrey Zohler*

*Prelude performed by Marya Danihel
"How Dear to Me the Hour," words by Thomas Moore 1808, set to the
Irish air "The Twisting of the Rope." Arranged by Charles Villiers Stanford.*

*Traditional songs on tenor recorder performed by Jeffrey Zohler
Bach Sinfonia 5 in E Flat Major performed by Catherine York*

*Supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts
and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts.*

GREGORY GATHERS, Co-Artistic Director of Pontine Theatre, holds a BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art. He learned theatrical design working at Theatre by the Sea in Portsmouth and at Tracy Costumes, in Boston. He has been designing and constructing all of Pontine Theatre's costumes, sets, puppets and props since 1982, and has collaborated with Ms. Mathews on the development and performance of Pontine's original works since 1984. Mr. Gathers has served as an onsite reporter for the National Endowment for the Arts, as design director for the Movement Theatre Quarterly, and on several panels at the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts.

MARGUERITE MATHEWS, Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Pontine Theatre, holds a degree in theatre from Michigan State University. She studied with the great French actor, Etienne Decroux at his L'Ecole du Mime Corporeal in Paris, France. She also worked with Thomas Leabhart at the University of Arkansas and at the Valley Studio in Spring Green, Wisconsin, before founding Pontine Theatre in 1977. She served a four-year term as President of the National Movement Theatre Association and a five-year term as editor of its publication, Movement Theatre Quarterly. Ms. Mathews has served two three-year terms as panelist at the National Endowment for the Arts and as an on-site reporter for the endowment. She has served on numerous state and local panels and is a two-term New Hampshire Artist Laureate Emerita. Ms. Mathews was presented with the Lotte Jacobi Living Treasure Award at the 2013 New Hampshire Governor's Arts Awards.

MARYA DANIHEL received her M.A. in Theatre Arts from Smith College. As a singer with a strong interest in history, she has given lecture/concerts at many well-known museums, including the Longfellow National Historic Site, The Museum of Our National Heritage, Old Sturbridge Village, Historic Deerfield, and Strawberry Banke. In 2005, she founded Vintage Voices, whose musicians perform in New Hampshire and Southern Maine in various combinations. Her solo lecture/concert, "Pleasures of the Parlor," was for several years underwritten by New Hampshire Humanities.

As a professional choral singer, she has sung with organizations such as the American Repertory Theatre, the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, and the Handel & Haydn Society. For many years she was a member of the choir at King's Chapel in Boston under the direction of Daniel Pinkham, and she has often appeared as a soloist with Portsmouth Pro Musica.

JEFFREY ZOHLER is a multi-instrumentalist who started performing professionally at the age of twelve. He spent many years recording and touring as drummer with the legendary singersongwriter/producer Otis Blackwell. Mr. Zohler studied classical and baroque flute with New York's Adrien Tei and performed with the Westbury Chamber Ensemble as principal flutist. Mr. Zohler joined Pontine Theatre on stage during their Christmas production of "It's A Wonderful Life," playing Appalachian dulcimer, zither and recorder. Mr. Zohler's music has been featured in several other Pontine productions, including "Cap'n Simeon's Store" and "The Common Heart."

SARAH ORNE JEWETT (1849 - 1909) was born and raised in South Berwick, Maine. The stories and novels that were to make her famous are set in the southern tier of Maine, especially the seacoast area, where she lived most of her life. Her literary reputation rests upon more than 170 works of fiction, most of which depict the lives of the ordinary people of nineteenth-century rural Maine.

Jewett was born into an established and wealthy family. As she herself acknowledged, writing was never "a bread and butter affair." The house in which she was born, a distinguished Georgian structure, had been purchased by Captain Jewett for the family ten years before Sarah's birth. It still stands in the center of South Berwick, well cared for by Historic New England.

In her most important fiction, Jewett mourned the passing of a world in which nature was still a sanctuary, in which community was still a possibility, and in which women of strength were the prime sustainers of the communal experience. These themes are given their fullest expression in the work considered to be her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896).

Jewett once remarked that when she first began submitting material for publication, she had no literary friends 'at court.' Yet it was not long after her initial successes that she moved into the center of Boston literary society and became fast friends with its reigning figures, James T. and Annie Adams Fields. After James's death in 1881, Jewett's already close relationship with Annie intensified. This became the most important relationship of Jewett's adult life. It ended only with Jewett's death in 1909.

I.

The woods were already filled with shadows one June evening though a bright sunset still glimmered faintly among the trunks of the trees. A little girl was driving home her cow, a plodding, provoking creature, but a valued companion for all that. They were striking deep into the woods, but their feet were familiar with the path, and it was no matter whether their eyes could see it or not.

There was hardly a night the summer through when the old cow could be found waiting at the pasture bars; on the contrary, it was her greatest pleasure to hide herself away among the huckleberry bushes. So Sylvia had to hunt for her until she found her until her childish patience was quite spent. If the creature had not given good milk and plenty of it, the case would have seemed very different to her owners. Besides, Sylvia had all the time there was, and very little use to make of it. Sometimes in pleasant weather it was a consolation to look upon the cow's pranks as an intelligent attempt to play hide and seek, and as the child had no playmates she lent herself to this amusement. Sylvia laughed when she came upon Mistress Moolly, and urged her affectionately homeward with a twig of birch leaves. The old cow stepped along the road at a good pace. Sylvia wondered what her grandmother would say because they were so late. Mrs. Tilley had chased the hornéd torment too many summer evenings herself to blame any one else for lingering. She was thankful as she waited that she had Sylvia to give such valuable assistance. There never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made! Everybody said that it was a good change for the child who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town. As for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm.

"'Afraid of folks,'" old Mrs. Tilley said to herself, after she had made the choice of Sylvia from her daughter's houseful of children, and was returning to the farm. When they reached the door of the lonely house and the cat came to purr loudly, and rub against them, Sylvia whispered that this was a beautiful place to live in, and she never should wish to go home.

The companions followed the shady wood-road. Sylvia felt sleepy as she walked along. However, it was not much farther to the house, and the air was soft and sweet. Suddenly Sylvia is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird's-whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy's whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive. Sylvia left the cow to whatever sad fate might await her, and stepped discreetly aside into the bushes, but she was too late. The enemy had discovered her.

"Halloa, little girl, how far is it to the road?"

"A good ways."

She did not dare to look boldly at the tall young man, but she came out of the bush and again followed the cow, while he walked alongside.

"I have been hunting for some birds, and I have lost my way, and need a friend very much. Don't be afraid. Speak up and tell me what your name is, and whether you think I can spend the night at your house, and go out gunning early in the morning."

Sylvia was more alarmed than before. Would not her grandmother consider her to blame? It did not seem to be her fault, but she hung her head as if the stem of it were broken.

Mrs. Tilley was standing in the doorway when the trio came into view. The cow gave a loud moo by way of explanation.

"Yes, you'd better speak up for yourself, you old trial! Where'd she tucked herself away this time, Sylvvy?"

But Sylvia kept an astonished silence; her grandmother did not comprehend the gravity of the situation. She must be mistaking the stranger for one of the farmer-lads of the region.

The young man bade Mrs. Tilley good-evening, and repeated his wayfarer's story, and asked if he could have a night's lodging.

"Put me anywhere you like. I must be off early in the morning, before day; but I am very hungry, indeed. You can give me some milk at any rate, that's plain."

"Dear sakes, yes. You might fare better if you went out to the main road a mile or so, but you're welcome to what we've got. You make yourself at home. You can sleep on husks or feathers. I raised them all myself. There's good pasturing for geese just below here towards the ma'sh."

It was a surprise to find so clean and comfortable a little dwelling in this New England wilderness. This was the best thrift of an old-fashioned farmstead, though on such a small scale that it seemed like a hermitage. He listened eagerly to the old woman's quaint talk, he watched Sylvia's pale face and shining gray eyes with enthusiasm, and insisted that this was the best supper he had eaten for a month, and afterward the new-made friends sat down in the door-way together while the moon came up.

The hostess gossiped frankly, adding presently that she had buried four children, so Sylvia's mother, and a son, Dan in California were all the children she had left.

"Dan, my boy, was a great hand to go gunning. I never wanted for pa'tridges or squer'ls while he was to home. He's been a great wand'rer and he's no hand to write letters. There, I don't blame him, I'd ha' seen the world myself if it had been so I could. Sylvvy takes after him. There

ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creaturs counts her one o' themselves. Squer'ls she'll tame to come an' feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds. Last winter she got the jay-birds to linger here, and I believe she'd 'a' scanted herself of her own meals to have plenty to throw out amongst 'em, if I hadn't kep' watch. Anything but crows, I tell her, I'm willin' to support -- though Dan he had a tamed one that did seem to have reason same as folks. It was round here a good spell after he went away. Dan an' his father they didn't hitch, -- and his father never held up his head ag'in after Dan had dared him an' gone off."

"So Sylvy knows all about birds, does she? I am making a collection of birds myself. I have been at it ever since I was a boy. There are two or three very rare ones I have been hunting for these five years. I mean to get them on my own ground if they can be found."

"Do you cage 'em up?"

"Oh no, they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them, and I have shot or snared every one myself. I caught a glimpse of a white heron a few miles from here on Saturday, and I have followed it in this direction. They have never been found in this district at all. The little white heron, it is."

He looked again at Sylvia with the hope of discovering that the heron was one of her acquaintances. But Sylvia was watching a hop-toad in the narrow footpath.

"You would know the heron if you saw it. A queer tall white bird with soft feathers and long thin legs. And it would have a nest perhaps in the top of a high tree, made of sticks, something like a hawk's nest. I can't think of anything I should like so much as to find that heron's nest. I would give ten dollars to anybody who could show it to me. I mean to spend my whole vacation hunting for it if need be."

No amount of thought, that night, could decide how many wished-for treasures the ten dollars, so lightly spoken of, would buy. Sylvia's heart gave a wild beat; she knew the heron, and had once stolen softly near where it stood in some swamp grass, away over at the other side of the woods. There was an open place where tall, nodding rushes grew, and her grandmother had warned her that she might sink in the soft black mud underneath and never be heard of more. Not far beyond were the salt marshes just this side the sea itself, which Sylvia wondered and dreamed about, but had never seen, but he had sometimes heard its great voice above the noise of the woods on stormy nights.

The next day the young sportsman hovered about the woods, and Sylvia kept him company. He told her many things about the birds and what they knew and where they lived and what they did with themselves. And he gave her a jack-knife, which she thought as great a treasure. Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she

could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much. But as the day waned, Sylvia still watched the young man with loving admiration. She had never seen anybody so charming and delightful; the woman's heart, asleep in the child, was vaguely thrilled by a dream of love. They stopped to listen to a bird's song; they pressed forward again eagerly, parting the branches -- speaking to each other rarely and in whispers; the young man going first and Sylvia following, fascinated, a few steps behind, with her gray eyes dark with excitement. At last evening began to fall, and they drove the cow home together.

II.

Half a mile from home, at the farther edge of the woods, where the land was highest, a great pine-tree stood, the last of its generation. Whether it was left for a boundary mark no one could say; the woodchoppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago, and a whole forest of sturdy trees, pines and oaks and maples, had grown again. But the stately head of this old pine towered above them all and made a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away. Sylvia knew it well. She believed that whoever climbed to the top of it could see the ocean; she had often laid her hand on the great rough trunk and looked up wistfully at those dark boughs that the wind always stirred, no matter how hot and still the air might be below. Now she thought of the tree with a new excitement, for why, if one climbed it at break of day, could not one see all the world, and discover from whence the white heron flew, and mark the place, and find the hidden nest? What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory.

The young sportsman and his old hostess were sound asleep, but Sylvia's great design kept her broad awake and watching. She forgot to think of sleep. The short summer night seemed as long as the winter darkness, and at last she stole out of the house and followed the pasture path through the woods, hastening toward the open ground beyond, listening with a sense of comfort and companionship to the drowsy twitter of a half-awakened bird, whose perch she had jarred in passing.

There was the huge tree asleep yet in the paling moonlight, and Sylvia began with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it, with tingling, eager blood coursing the channels of her whole frame, with her bare feet and fingers, that pinched and held like bird's claws to the monstrous ladder reaching up, up, almost to the sky itself. First she must mount the white oak tree that grew alongside, where she was almost lost among the dark branches and the green leaves heavy and wet with dew; a bird fluttered off its nest, and a red squirrel ran to and fro and scolded pettishly at the harmless housebreaker. Sylvia felt her way easily. She had often climbed there, and knew that higher still one of the

oak's upper branches chafed against the pine trunk, just where its lower boughs were set close together. There, when she made the dangerous pass from one tree to the other, the great enterprise would really begin.

She crept out along the swaying oak limb at last, and took the daring step across into the old pine-tree. The way was harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff as she went round and round the tree's great stem, higher and higher upward. The sparrows and robins in the trees below were beginning to wake and twitter to the dawn.

The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward. It was like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth; it must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved his new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and frowned away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east.

Sylvia's face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground, when the last thorny bough was past, and she stood trembling and tired but wholly triumphant, high in the tree-top. Yes, there was the sea with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it, and toward that glorious east flew two hawks with slow-moving pinions. How low they looked in the air from that height when one had only seen them before far up, and dark against the blue sky. Their gray feathers were as soft as moths; they seemed only a little way from the tree, and Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds. Westward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages, truly it was a vast and awesome world.

The birds sang louder and louder. At last the sun came up bewilderingly bright. Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away. Where was the white heron's nest in the sea of green branches, and was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height? Now look down again, Sylvia, where the green marsh is set among the shining birches and dark hemlocks; there where you saw the white heron once you will see him again; look, look! a white spot of him like a single floating feather comes up from the dead hemlock and grows larger, and rises, and comes close at last, and goes by the landmark pine with steady sweep of wing and outstretched slender neck and crested head. And wait! wait! do not move a foot or a finger, little girl, do not send an

arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours, and cries back to his mate on the nest and plumes his feathers for the new day!

She knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers, and goes back presently to his home in the green world beneath. Then Sylvia, well satisfied, makes her perilous descent, not daring to look far below the branch she stands on, ready to cry sometimes because her fingers ache and her lamed feet slip. Wondering over and over again what the stranger will say to her, and what he will think when she tells him how to find his way straight to the heron's nest.

"Sylvy, Sylvy!" called the busy old grandmother again and again, but nobody answered, and the small husk bed was empty and Sylvia had disappeared.

The guest waked from a dream, was sure from the way the shy little girl looked once or twice yesterday that she had at least seen the white heron, and now she must really be made to tell. Here she comes now, paler than ever, and her worn old frock is torn and tattered, and smeared with pine pitch. The grandmother and the sportsman stand in the door together and question her, and the splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree by the green marsh.

But Sylvia does not speak, though her grandmother fretfully rebukes her, and the young man's kind, appealing eyes are looking straight in her own. He can make them rich with money and they are poor. He waits to hear the story she can tell.

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? The murmur of the pine's green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away.

Dear loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day, that could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves! Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood. Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, -- who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!