

Excerpt from

Brimful of Push

By

Wayne Peter Liebman

This excerpt is copyrighted and is
for viewing purposes only.

For a complete draft or production rights, please
contact the author or his agent.

Copyright ©2004
by Wayne Peter Liebman
liebmanw@dogearplays.org

Cast of Characters

An ensemble (minimum of three women, six men) plays the following principal parts:

WORKING MEN

James Marshall	30s to 50s. Discoverer of gold in California. Leading man with a tragic air.
John Sutter	30s. Swiss-born merchant and early California land baron. A military buffoon.
Sam Clemens	20-30. Frontier newspaperman who later took the pen name of Mark Twain. A stout-hearted wag.
Dan De Quille	30-40. Pen name of William Wright, gruff and savvy editor of the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise.

ENTREPRENEURS

Adolph Sutro	30s to 50s. Jewish, German-born engineer. If a bulldog were a man, he'd look like Sutro.
Billy Ralston	30s to 50s. Secretary of the Bank of California. A force of nature with a boundless enthusiasm.
William Sharon	40s to 50s. Virginia City agent of the Bank of California. A shrewd, secretive, nervous ferret of a man.
D.O. Mills	30s-50s. President of the Bank of California. A scared jackrabbit--Barney Fife.
James Fair	Comstock miner and enemy of Ralston. Savage as a meat axe.

WOMEN

Queen Calafia	Mythical queen of California, possessing a regal sensuality.
Rose	20s. A prostitute selling innocence. Played by the actor who plays Calafia.
Belle Cora	20s. A madam. Ralston's mistress. Tough love.
Lizzie Ralston	20-40. Ralston's trophy wife, and not as dumb as she looks.
Laura Sutro	20s to 40s. Adolph Sutro's sister. Simultaneously simple and wise, and no pushover.

The ensemble also plays various women and boys, men and miners, townsmen and gamblers, bankers and politicians of the frontier.

Scene

Principally, the towns and valleys, mines and mountains of California and the Nevada territory. Occasionally, Europe, Latin America and the eastern United States.

Time

Principally 1848-1879.

Notes

Brimful of Push is a work of historical fiction. All the principal characters existed, although biographical accuracy has been sacrificed to serve dramatic intent.

Rose/Calafia: Although the two roles should be played by the same actress, Rose is a separate character, not to be played as Calafia's alter ego in mortal form.

Set: The play moves rapidly through multiple locales ranging from elegant to primitive. This could be suggested by an open, planked area surrounded by a network of vertical beams resembling railroad ties or mine timbering; upstage, an elevated platform with trap door, where scenes may be played above and below; behind, a cyclorama expressive of changing daylight and the night sky.

Costuming: The play's fluid, fable-like nature may be reinforced if costume, prop and furniture changes are performed on stage in full view of the house and if actors not in a scene remain on stage to watch. Prop tables and costume racks may be incorporated into the set.

Sound: Where possible, actors not specifically in a scene may provide appropriate musical and sound effects--animals (vocal calls), weather (patting of knees for rain, foil for thunder, etc.), incidental noises (bells, boat whistles, clanging machinery), etc.

Suggested roles for a cast of nine:

WOMEN:

1. Rose/Calafia, Woman #1, Boy
2. Laura Sutro, Lizzie Ralston, Woman #2, Boy, Secretary, Tunnel Worker #3
3. Belle Cora, Spanish Woman, Booster, Maria, Woman #3, Speculator #2, Miner #3, Boy

MEN:

1. James Marshall, Miner #4, Leland Stanford, Pedestrian, Congressman, Erlanger, Exchange Man, Banker #1, J. Pierpont Morgan
2. Billy Ralston, Miner #1, Cooper, Waller, Heckler,
3. William Sharon, Miner #2,
4. Adolph Sutro, Banker #2
5. Samuel Clemens, Factory owner, Passenger, Player #2, Pike, James Flood, Fitch, Speculator #1, Desk Clerk, Banker #3, Judge, Tunnel Worker #1, Spanish Man
- 6 John Sutter, Dan De Quille, Townsman, Player #1, Farmer, Driver, Crew Boss (Matthews), D. O. Mills, Cornelius Vanderbilt, James Fair, Tunnel Worker #2, Bellamy

ACT I

SETTING: A landscape vast, raw, protean, young.
As the audience take their seats,
Copland's "Old American Songs" plays
until the house lights dim.

AT RISE: An empty stage. Sudden voices.
ENSEMBLE proceed singing ("Ring the
Banjo" by Stephen Foster) from back of
the house up the aisles to the stage.
BELLAMY, in carnival barker attire,
steps forward and begins his patter.

BELLAMY

Step lively, ladies and caballeros. This way. Welcome, ma'am!
Sir, welcome. Welcome to the most rip-starving invention in
the land of freedom, the engineering feat of the age! For an
admittance of a few pennies, we shall commence to tour the
Adolph Sutro Railway Tunnel, authorized by the United States
Congress and built into the heart of the Virginia City mines
at great cost and appalling loss of life. This is no namby-
pamby walking tour, but a contrivance without precedent in
history. A look-see into the realm of King Minos himself. A
four-mile excursion to set youthful blood into a flow, yet
safe as God's pocket. Any takers? No? Now you folks look like
you've got two oars in the water. So I'm going to distribute
amongst you absolutely free some complimentary tickets. Here
you are, sir, right here. There you go, little lady. And you,
ma'am. The lucky few.

(HE distributes tickets to the
first row. The BOY steps
forward.)

BOY

Mister, can I have one?

BELLAMY

Certainly you can, my boy.

(gives ticket)

Now Adolph Sutro, a man to whom I was as close as two coats
of paint, was no mush-head who refused a bargain, but a man
of destiny. If heaven dropped him a date, he opened his
mouth.

(SUTRO rushes in, disheveled.
His accent is faintly
Germanic. Hard, stubborn,
stiff-necked, once HE sinks
his teeth into something HE
doesn't let go.)

SUTRO

Stop! Stop!

What's that?

SUTRO

Stop at once, I say!

(HE snatches the BOY'S ticket.)

Give me that! This tunnel was paid for in blood! You will not mock those lives by turning it into a circus show--

(SUTRO takes the tickets from the audience.)

BELLAMY

Mr. Sutro! You can't do that, sir.

SUTRO

BELLAMY

I will not have my tunnel made a laughingstock!

These people will pay good money to see inside!

BELLAMY

It's not your tunnel anymore.

SUTRO

You can't take away a man's work. I beat them all. Ralston, Sharon, the lot of them. I built it with my sweat. And Laura's. For the sake of those good miners.

SUTRO

BELLAMY

It will always be mine.

It belongs to everyone now.

BELLAMY

It's part of history. You should be proud.

SUTRO

Laura! Where's Laura? Where's my sister?

LAURA

(steps forward)

Here, Dolphi. What's this? Tears?

SUTRO

(dabs his eye)

A speck of granite. They're trying to take the tunnel again. It's the bank. I'm sure they're behind it. Look! Here they are! What did I tell you? Ralston! Sharon! Miserable bankers!

(SUTRO finds RALSTON and SHARON in the ensemble, pulls THEM forward and addresses THEM.)

I won, do you hear? Twenty years I endured your treachery! No more! You've lost. Go!

RALSTON

That's right, Mr. Sutro. You won. No one can take that from you.

SHARON

You got the best of us. It's over now.

LAURA

You see? No one's taking anything. Come on.

SUTRO

But where?

SPANISH WOMAN

(holding a book)

To Seville. 1510. Where a new story has just been published.
(SHE shows SUTRO the book.)

SUTRO

"The Adventures of Esplandian."

ENSEMBLE

Ohhh!

SPANISH MAN

But who is he, this Esplandian? What does he want?

SPANISH WOMAN

To be the herald of change. For which he binds himself to the white-hot wing of desire.

SUTRO

Where does he go?

SPANISH WOMAN

(reads)

"There is, on the right hand of the Indies, an island of bold and craggy rocks."

LAURA

"It is called California."

ENSEMBLE

Ahhh!

SPANISH WOMAN

"It is peopled with Amazons, and everywhere abounds with gold and precious stones."

SUTRO

That's a fairy tale. There is no such place.

SPANISH WOMAN

There was a time when everything you imagined became real.
All you had to do was say it.

LAURA

Dolphi! Have you forgotten the stories papa read to us?
Stories of a land where anything was possible?

SUTRO

We were so small! And his hands around the pages, so big.
(beat)
Everything was possible.

LAURA

Even for us. So listen again. From the very start.

SPANISH WOMAN

"There ruled over that island of California a queen of
majestic proportions, in the very ripeness of womanhood."

LAURA

"Her name was
(with awe: CAL-uh-FEE-a)
Calafia."

CROSSFADE to:

MARSHALL and CALAFIA. LIGHT and SOUND
(chimes?) conjure another world, a
world of myth. CALAFIA, wearing a
tiara, appears magically--a sun-kissed
goddess painted on a dreamy, old-
California orange label. MARSHALL, the
best of his breed, is dazzled by HER.

CALAFIA

So. Your saw mill is done, Marshall.

MARSHALL

Nearly.

CALAFIA

And have you considered what I showed you?

MARSHALL

Why me?

CALAFIA

Are you afraid to take it?

MARSHALL

Spanish been here, what, 300 years? Never saw it. Indian
before that.

CALAFIA
I've been waiting a long time, Mr. Marshall.

MARSHALL
Waitin' for what, exactly?

CALAFIA
To begin, of course.

MARSHALL
I never met someone like you.

CALAFIA
You're the first man I ever wanted.

MARSHALL
Dang.

(beat)
You're not real. I mean, you're in my head.

CALAFIA
What of that? Don't you like my gold? Is it not real enough?
(SHE extracts from her bodice
a long, translucent gold
scarf, as light as air. SOUND:
chimes.)

MARSHALL
It's like a frozen fire.

CALAFIA
I am the fire in your head, hombre, the song in water. All my
rivers are gold.

MARSHALL
Oh, Lordy, you want me to--

CALAFIA
Open my gates, Mi Corazon!

MARSHALL kisses, gropes CALAFIA. SHE
laughs, pushes HIM away. SOUND: chimes.
With a gesture, SHE leads HIM off.
CROSSFADE to:

A storeroom in Sutter's Fort. 1848.
JOHN SUTTER straightens a counter. HE
has a military air, oddly comical.

SUTTER
Boy?
(no response)
Damn boy, where are you?

(HE busies himself and doesn't see MARSHALL enter. HE starts when MARSHALL speaks.)

MARSHALL SUTTER (cont'd)
Colonel Sutter. I-- Man alive! Don't--

(SUTTER composes himself.)

SUTTER (cont'd)
walk up on me like that. You got trouble? I've got to have my mill done, Marshall.

MARSHALL
I came to show you this.

(MARSHALL produces a pouch.)

SUTTER
What's that?

MARSHALL
Let's go in back. I want no one to hear this.

SUTTER
What the dickens? There's none here but you and me.
(MARSHALL empties the pouch on the counter. It's filled with gold nuggets.)
What does this mean?

MARSHALL
Look!
(HE bites a nugget and shows the marks to SUTTER.)
See that? Teeth marks. Go ahead.

(SUTTER bites.)

SUTTER
It's soft!

MARSHALL
It won't break. You can pound it all day, thin as a fly wing. I found that two days ago in the tailrace. Collected overnight.

SUTTER
Gold?

MARSHALL
I know it to be nothing else.

SUTTER

Sweet Jesu! It's in the water?

MARSHALL

It's everywhere, Colonel Sutter. You can take it at random. No trouble.

SUTTER

Who knows about this?

MARSHALL

You and me. Some of the men. They won't say anything.

SUTTER

How do you know?

MARSHALL

They're Mormon, Colonel. Good as their word.
(A noise behind THEM. A BOY
carrying hides.)

What's that?

(MARSHALL sees.)

What the hell are you doing here?

BOY

I was bringin' in--

MARSHALL

You listen to us, boy?

BOY

No sir. I didn't hear--

(MARSHALL seizes the BOY by
the collar.)

MARSHALL

Don't lie to me, boy!

BOY

I just brought these hides, Colonel Sutter, like you said.

SUTTER

He's a good boy, James.

MARSHALL

You heard nothing, right?

BOY

I was in back. Couldn't make nothing out.

MARSHALL

I find out different we'll take a trip up river.

BOY

Yes sir! Hard to breathe sir.

MARSHALL

I'll learn you to breathe underwater! Want to make a die of it?

BOY

No sir! That's a fact!

(MARSHALL releases.)

MARSHALL

Get on out.

(The BOY runs off. A beat,
and:)

Colonel, this stays between us. Till we know what it is.

SUTTER

I'll ride up tomorrow. We can reconnoiter.

MARSHALL

You and me. We got a bargain?

SUTTER

Agreed.

CROSSFADE. The BOY appears. In a frenzy, HE runs up and down the aisles, shouting at the audience.

BOY

There's Gold! Gold at the saw mill! I saw it with my own eyes! Gold at Colonel Sutter's mill. South fork on the American at Coloma. You can take it from the river! It's all around. Gold, everybody! Gold for the taking! Sweet land o' Goshen, it's gold!

CROSSFADE to:

Sierra gold fields. SOUND: Earl Scruggs' "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," underscoring. MINERS enter. Miner #2 carries shovel, blankets and gold pan. CLEMENS enters to the side, scribbling. The young Mark Twain is a brash, enthusiastic youth. HE is joined by WOMAN #1. She reads a newspaper.

WOMAN #1

(reading to ENSEMBLE)

"Considerable excitement exists in our midst. We read of nothing but gold, gold, gold."

CLEMENS

"It bids fair to become a gold fever, and nine tenths of every store keep, mechanic or day laborer will leave San Francisco for Sacramento."

(MINORS #3 and #4 enter,
looking and racing about.)

WOMAN #1

June, 1848. Sierra population: 2500.

MINER #3

There's two Argonauts just took \$17,000 out of Weber Creek in two days!

MINER #2

Oh, my stars!

(HE follows after MINER #3, who runs off.)

MINER #4

Six boys had fifty Injuns working the Feather River. They took 300 pounds!

MINER #2

I believe I'm comin' with you!

(HE changes direction, follows after MINER #4, who runs off.)

WOMAN #1

June, 1849. Sierra population: 100,000.

(DE QUILLE, an older and wiser ten-year veteran of the West, enters and takes notice of CLEMENS.)

CLEMENS

"It was the only population of the kind that the world has ever seen. No gray and stooping veterans. 99,900 men."

WOMAN #1

One hundred women.

(an awkward beat, and:)

CLEMENS

I/10.

"Stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brimful of push and energy--"

MINER #2

(re-entering)

Wait. How many women?

(SOUND: Banjo music fades.)

WOMAN #1

(SHE turns coquettish.)

A hundred.

(CLEMENS does not like being upstaged.)

CLEMENS

"The most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitude of an unpeopled land--"

MINER #2

What's your name, sweet heart?

WOMAN #1

They call me Rose. On account of my cheeks.

CLEMENS

(pushing his case)

"They fairly revelled in gold, whiskey, fights and fandangos; they lived in tents, washed their own shirts, knocked down forests."

(ROSE is a magnet for the opposite sex. CLEMENS observes in dismay.)

MINER #2

You're the cherry of the valley.

ROSE

Sure you don't want to call me cherry?
(SHE caresses his cheek.)

MINER #2

I believe I'll tarry a while.

(ROSE leads MINOR #2 off.)

CLEMENS

(emphatic, calling after)

"It was a wild, free, disorderly, grotesque society.