



CRAIG SCHWARTZ

LOVERS: Stark Sands plays Clyde Barrow and Laura Osnes portrays Bonnie Parker in a musical of the outlaws' story that premieres in La Jolla.

Can they steal your heart?

The musical 'Bonnie & Clyde,' with its stark look at the bloodstained couple, opens fire in La Jolla.

ANNE MARIE WELSH REPORTING FROM LA JOLLA >>> Before dying at age 25 in a hail of lawmen's bullets, Clyde Barrow had achieved the fame he sought — and he had killed 14 men, directly or indirectly. His loyal moll, Bonnie Parker, may never have shot anyone. But as one of their cohorts in the Barrow gang said, "She was one hell of a loader."

The notorious 1930s bank robbers were transformed into mythical outlaw lovers by director Arthur Penn, actor-producer Warren Beatty and screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton in the 1967 film "Bonnie and Clyde." That myth has yet to be dispelled, despite the revisionism of time and two recent books about the couple's 1932-34 crime spree.

Now a new musical, "Bonnie & Clyde," is in previews at La Jolla Playhouse and director Jeff Calhoun says of the show, "Ironically, this may be the most truthful account yet of the lives of Bonnie and Clyde, even though it is a musical."

It's also a dark, spare vision of their story, a work its creators compare to musicals such as "Spring Awakening" or "Next to Normal," with scenic inspiration from the 1988 Steppenwolf Theatre Company production of "The Grapes of Wrath."

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Associated Press



Warner Home Video

LEGENDS: The real Barrow and Parker, top in an undated photograph, were depicted by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in the much-lauded 1967 movie.

Musical's tone is a major challenge

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"Young people today may never have seen the film, but they know that Bonnie and Clyde were young and they were outlaws," said writer Ivan Menchell. "The show needs to be as intimate as the story demands but also as expansive as that title."

The show has a country music score by the prolific though critically derided Frank Wildhorn ("The Scarlet Pimpernel," "Jekyll & Hyde"), bluegrass orchestrations by music director John McDaniel, and lyrics by Englishman Don Black ("Sunset Boulevard"). The book is by Menchell, who's authored plays, screenplays ("The Cemetery Club") and TV scripts, but never a new musical.

Despite the title it shares with the film, the show's creators have taken their conception of the characters in a different direction. And Menchell had written the musical's book by the time two popular histories, "Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde" by Jeff Guinn and Paul Schneider's "Bonnie and Clyde: The Lives Behind the Legend," were published this year.

Menchell relied heavily on firsthand accounts of the pair's exploits and the period. He took a key plot twist from "Ambush," a book by the youngest member of the posse tracking the pair, Ted Hinton.

"There's a line in 'Ambush' about knowing Bonnie Parker when she was a waitress in Dallas. I thought he was in love with her," Menchell said of Hinton. So he created a love triangle.

"The show for us became about two very specific things, a tragic love triangle and how young Bonnie and Clyde were. What must it have been like for the parents to have children



J. KAT WORONOWICZ

SHAPING A STORY: Jeff Calhoun, left, who directs "Bonnie & Clyde," with Ivan Menchell, who wrote the book.

turn out like this?" Menchell asked.

The character of Bonnie's widowed mother, Emma, has a featured role in the show. Mare Winningham, who earned wide acclaim in her New York musical debut in the Patty Griffin compilation, "10 Million Miles," plays Emma. She sings the bluesy lament "When Did the Devil Take My Girl Away."

Menchell used passages from "The True Story of Bonnie and Clyde," the book Emma wrote with Nell Barrow, Clyde's sister. "Some of Bonnie's poems are there. The words between the police and Clyde's father are verbatim. Clyde's longest speech, a monologue, comes near the end of the show. That's all Clyde in his own words."

Tone is the big challenge in dramatizing the lives of Parker and Barrow, said Calhoun: "You want to entertain the audience yet stay true to the tragic story. You want the audience to fall in love with them, but at the same time not to

minimize the brutality."

Three weeks into rehearsals with elements still changing, Calhoun said, "the material itself rejects any attempt to go showbiz with it."

Menchell added, with a straight face, "We want all of it — the tragic love story, the passion, the commitment to family, everything that endears us to them — and yet still keep them homicidal."

If that mix sounds paradoxical or impossible, Calhoun said, "It helps that they're young kids and that in the beginning it's joyful and funny — until it isn't."

The collaborators cast 31-year-old actor Stark Sands as Clyde, and 23-year-old Laura Osnes as Bonnie.

Sands has worked steadily since graduating from USC and landing his first job on HBO's "Six Feet Under." His film debut came as the gay, obsessive-compulsive son of Angela Arden (played by satirist-drag queen Charles Busch) in the movie version of Busch's

stage spoof, "Die, Mommie, Die!" Clint Eastwood later cast Sands in "Flags of Our Fathers" (2006). More recently, he played Lt. Nate Fick in HBO's "Generation Kill," about the early days of the Iraq war.

Sands' breakthrough in theater came in the Tony-winning 2007 revival of "Journey's End," a World War I-set British drama. He played an innocent and idealistic officer during the waning days of the war, a doomed British soldier "frightfully excited" to be chosen for the mission that kills him. Sands held his own with veterans Hugh Dancy, Boyd Gaines and Jefferson Mays, and was nominated for a featured actor Tony. "Bonnie & Clyde" is his first professional musical.

"I think they were looking for more of a raw, edgy quality. Laura and I are a good match," Sands said. The actors practiced their first duet just before a reading of the musical at New York's Roundabout Theatre in February. "They haven't changed a thing about that song," Sands said.

He's exploring "what happened to Clyde that brought out his psychotic nature. One of Clyde's big goals was to get back at the Texas correctional system which so mistreated him."

He and Osnes agree that Bonnie saw Barrow as a way out during a time of horrific poverty and suffering at the height of the Depression. "Clyde dreamed big," Osnes said.

Petite, with a supple voice that can accommodate a country quaver, Osnes was performing in a production of "Grease" near St. Paul, Minn., when she was "discovered" just four years ago. She went on to win the NBC reality TV competition "Grease: You're the One

That I Want" and with it, the role of good girl Sandy in Kathleen Marshall's 2007 revival of the faux '50s rock show.

Her other Broadway gig ended a month ago. She played Nellie Forbush, replacing a pregnant Kelli O'Hara, in Bartlett Sher's Tony-winning revival of "South Pacific" at Lincoln Center. Bonnie Parker is the first role Osnes has originated.

"The truth is we didn't want stars in this show," Calhoun said. "The title is the star now. But we think it's a show that will create stars."

Calhoun was still working out details of how to stage the violence that the Barrow gang committed and brought upon themselves, including the climactic blood bath so effectively choreographed in the movie.

"It's such a big dramatic stroke when you do violence on stage that if you do too much, it loses its effect. We're trying to be very strategic," Calhoun said. "In the movies, there are a million ways to kill people and keep it interesting. On stage, you're just so exposed. You have to be clever and artistic."

Menchell thinks the collaborators have achieved that artistry. "We're more interested in where the violence comes from than just the gun battle itself. There's a progression to it. It's orchestrated like a piece of music."

And conjuring again the contradictions that led the law to come down hard on Bonnie as well as Clyde, Menchell said, "They were desperate to see their parents. They shot their way through the country in a circle so they could get back to see their families. As homicidal maniacs go, they really were good family people."

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