

THE CRASH AT CRUSH

BY JO MORELLO

A FULL-LENGTH PLAY WITH MUSIC,
BASED ON AN HISTORIC EVENT IN TEXAS IN 1896

"The Crash at Crush is one of the most memorable and moving new plays I have read in recent years. It is an honest and humorous portrait of a way of life (rural Texas) and an era in American history (late 1800s) rich in drama but unfortunately neglected by other writers. . . . Ms. Morello offers a fresh and wonderful new perspective on a time and place nearly forgotten. . . . I am honored to have directed the first staged reading of *The Crash at Crush*."

--Marion Castleberry, PhD, *Professor of Theatre Arts, Baylor University, Waco, TX; Artistic Director of the Horton Foote American Playwrights Festival (July 2007)*

"I have had the inspirational opportunity of working with playwright Jo Morello on a world premiere of her play *The Crash at Crush* in Dallas, Texas. Jo's understanding of production, publicity, development and theatre management gave her a unique voice to stand out. . . . She works well with directors, producers and designers and approaches her work from a very open, collaborative and creative approach."

--Tim Shane, *Executive Producer/Artistic Director, Shane-Arts/Dallas Hub Theater, Dallas, TX (April 2009)*

"Jo's latest work, *The Crash at Crush*, exemplifies why I consider her a wonderful, imaginative writer of plays."

--Marie J. Kilker, *Ph.D., American Theatre Critics Association (International Committee); Administrative/Professional & Adjunct Professor of Theatre, Retired (July 2007)*

"I have read Ms. Morello's newest work, *The Crash at Crush*. . . . **a perfect example of the playwright's incredible imagination** and ability to bring to life a world filled with compelling characters and fascinating stories."

--Steven Ditmyer, *Director, Off the Page Reading Series National Actors Theatre, New York, NY (May 2006)*

AWARDS

Winner, 2009-1010 Individual Artist Fellowship
Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs

Winner, 2007-08 Artist Enhancement Grant
Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs

Finalist, Women Playwrights' Initiative, Orlando, FL

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Production: Shane Arts at Dallas Hub Theater, Dallas, TX
Aug. 29-30 and Sept. 4-5-6, 2008; Director: Tim Shane

Workshop, Baylor University Graduate School of Theatre and
Staged Reading, Waco Hippodrome, Waco, TX, both in May 2007
Director: Marion Castleberry, SSSC, 2006 Drama Desk Nominee;
Professor of Theatre Arts at Baylor University;
Artistic Director of Horton Foote American Playwrights Festival

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THE CRASH AT CRUSH

By Jo Morello

A Full-Length Play with Music

Based on an Historic Event in Texas in 1896

Two Acts, approx. 50 min. each; 6 M, 2 F, some doubling
Simple, suggested set with projections of actual photographs of the train wreck
Public domain (prerecorded) music includes compositions by Scott Joplin,
arranged & performed by Dick Hyman;
John Philip Sousa Marches conducted by Sousa;
Folk music of the era.

SYNOPSIS

When it came to dreaming big, 33-year-old Willie Crush was the best. Hired to sell tickets on the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad (the Katy), this friend of P.T. Barnum knew that railroad wrecks drew crowds in minutes. Think how many would come if they knew in advance! Why not stage a wreck? A natural salesman and publicist, he readily convinced the Katy's management. The big day would be September 15, 1896.

Willie selected two old steam engines from the railroad's scrap yard for the wreck. He found the perfect site just outside Waco, and the railroad named the huge city-for-a-day in his honor. He fully expected "The Crash at Crush" to draw 40,000 to 50,000 people, most of them paying passengers on the Katy. Wanting the great day to be remembered, he hired photographers and even attracted young Scott Joplin, who wrote "The Great Crush Collision March" to commemorate the event. Willie wanted the whole world to notice, especially Katherine, who mattered most to him. He had the support of nearly everyone involved—except for one old Katy railroad hand who swore the boilers would burst. "Ye'll have dead people all over the place," he warned. But the supremely confident Willie was unstoppable.

NOTES

The Crash at Crush tells the true story of a spectacular event but employs projections, sound, prerecorded music and a unit set to help keep production requirements manageable. The playwright has obtained high-resolution images of actual photographs of the 1896 crash (enclosed), taken by Waco photographer Jarvis Deane, a character in the play, and suggested for projections—along with rights to arrangements and performances of Scott Joplin music by internationally recognized musician Dick Hyman. The John Philip Sousa marches are recordings of Sousa himself conducting his own band before the turn of the 19th century. All selected songs are authentic to the era and in the public domain.

DISCLAIMER

This story is based, in part, on true events, but certain liberties have been taken with names, places, and dates, and some characters have been invented or their behavior fictionalized—sometimes even those bearing the names of people involved in the event. The playwright's imagination has ascribed personal stories and traits to the characters, and these are not represented as true portrayals of the persons who were actually involved in the true events described in this story.

THE CRASH AT CRUSH

6M, 2F; some doubling; two acts of 55 minutes each

Cast of characters

- Scott Joplin..... 29. Musician, African-American. Polite, quiet. Educated and well-spoken. Based in Sedalia, MO, a major stop on the Katy line. Rides the Katy to Texas to learn more about the proposed train wreck.
- William “Willie” G. Crush....30. The Katy RR’s general passenger agent. A flashy, confident charmer who can’t hear “can’t.” Mustache. Snappy dresser even in a business suit—with cowboy boots. Kentucky accent. Loves Katherine but it seems unrequited.
- Marcus Avery.....Telegraph operator and Willie’s assistant. Good-natured. 40 or older; has seen it all.
- Seamus O’Donnell.....Railroad engineer from Ireland. Heavy brogue. Dour and negative. [pron. Shay’-muss] Rarely smiles. Age 50 or older.
- Margaret O’Donnell.....Daughter of Seamus. Nearing 17 and young for her age. Sweet, Positive--but devious if necessary. Rough edges. Always sees the good in people. Wants to serve. Infatuated with Crush but feels “he doesn’t need me.” She’s lived so long with her father’s negativity that she’s enchanted by Willie’s enthusiasm and energy.
- B. J. ReeseWillie’s boss, Katherine’s father; Katy president.
- Katherine Reese Reese’s daughter. 26 years old. Born in New Jersey but has lived in Indiana and elsewhere. Practical, pragmatic. Ahead of her time in wanting to assert herself. She’s bemused by Willie but skeptical about his exploits and perceived immaturity.
- Jarvis Deane.....An enthusiastic photographer from Waco; 20s.

Doubled:

- Gandy dancers.....Black men who work in pairs as maintenance laborers. They stand upright holding long metal poles that they use to straighten RR track, moving in unison to the caller’s rhythmic chant. Seen only in silhouette, wearing RR caps with distinctive billed fronts. May be doubled as follows:
- Gandy dancer #1.....doubled w/Willie
- Gandy dancer #2.....doubled w/Seamus
- Gandy dancer #3.....doubled w/Reese
- Gandy dancer #4.....doubled w/Jarvis Deane
- Dan James (Voice only).....Member of the Katy’s board of directors. (May be doubled with Seamus or another actor).
- Conductor (Voice only)
- Constable O’Ryan (Voice only)
- Others (Voices only)

THE CRASH AT CRUSH

List of Scenes (Suggested sets and projections)

ACT I

- SCENE 1
Time: July 1896.
Place: Dallas, Texas. The depot for the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (M-K-T) Railroad, called the Katy.
- SCENE 2
Time: Late morning, a few days later.
Place: The same.
- SCENE 3
Time: Early August 1896.
Place: The same.
- SCENE 4
TIME: Late August 1896.
PLACE: The collision site: A pasture 16 miles north of Waco, just south of West, Texas.

ACT II

- SCENE 1
Time: Late August 1896.
Place: The Katy Depot in Dallas.
- SCENE 2
Time: the same.
Place:
--The Reese front porch.
--The Katy Depot in Dallas.
- SCENE 3
Time: September 1, 1896.
Place: The Katy Depot in Dallas.
- SCENE 4
Time: The Big Day, September 15, 1896; 10 a.m.
Place: Crush, TX. The collision site.
- SCENE 5
Time: The Big Day, September 15, 1896; 3:30 p.m.
Place: Crush, TX. The collision site.
- SCENE 6
Time: September 15, 1896; 9:00 p.m.
Place: Crush, TX. The collision site.
- SCENE 7
Time: a few days later, early morning.
Place:
--The Reese front porch.
--The Katy Depot in Dallas.

The Crash at Crush (10-page excerpt from ACT I, Scene 2)

REESE

(to Willie)

I've been presenting your proposal to the board of directors. James was the last name on the list.

WILLIE

Yessir. Have you convinced them?

REESE

Some. The vote could go either way. But I convinced myself. It wasn't until I argued your case with them that I realized how much sense it makes. . . in a crazy way. But times are changing and we have to change with them. Willie, the Katy needs men like you! Time was, we looked for men with muscle to lay track, blast through mountains, bridge wide rivers, fight off Indians. Now we need smart young men with fresh ideas to bring people back to the rails. You have my support.

WILLIE

Thank you, B.J.

REESE

Don't celebrate yet. Not until we hear from the board.

REESE goes to his office.

A WHISTLE. WILLIE checks his watch.

WILLIE

Noon already.

MARCUS

(picking up his lunch pail)

Care to join me?

KATHERINE enters from DSL, carrying her father's lunch in a very nice basket. When WILLIE sees HER, HE leaves the office, rushing past MARCUS towards HER. As he passes Marcus. . .

MARCUS

Tomorrow, then?

(to Willie's back, in a stage whisper, as he enters his office)

Hard-to-get, Willie. Hard-to-get.

WILLIE slows down, trying to stroll casually as he approaches KATHERINE. MARCUS carries his lunch to a bench or log DSC.

WILLIE

Good afternoon, Miss Katherine.

Mr. Crush.

KATHERINE

Aw, now what'd I tell you? Please don't be formal. Call me Willie!

WILLIE

Willie.

KATHERINE

To what do we owe the honor?

WILLIE

I brought Papa's lunch.

KATHERINE

I'll take it to him if you'd like. . . May I?

WILLIE

Before SHE can answer, HE's peering into her basket. She's mildly annoyed.

(pulling out an apple)
He's a lucky man.

WILLIE

Lucky because I didn't make it. Mama's the cook
(taking the basket back)
. . . . and I'm the delivery girl.

KATHERINE

Lucky in other ways.

WILLIE

He happily rubs the apple with his handkerchief, ready to take a bite, but ever the gentleman, he'll wait until she leaves. As she enters Reese's office. .

Please give your mamma my best. . . . and thank your father for the apple.

WILLIE

KATHERINE regards him coolly. MARGARET enters from SR, carrying SEAMUS's lunch in a metal pail. SHE makes a beeline for WILLIE.

(to Willie, coyly)
Hello, Willie.

MARGARET

HE nods and eats the apple.

MARGARET

You must be hungry. I'll run home and fix something-- .

WILLIE

Thank you, but—

SEAMUS drifts in and sits on a log or bench DSR.
HE sees Margaret mooning over WILLIE.

SEAMUS

MARGARET!!!

MARGARET remains rooted to HER spot,
watching WILLIE eat the apple.

SEAMUS

MARGARET!!! Will ye not be joinin' me?

MARGARET tears herself away from WILLIE and
joins SEAMUS DSR. SHE gives SEAMUS his
lunch pail. WILLIE, oblivious to HER wiles, joins
MARCUS.

SEAMUS

(opening his lunch pail)
Let's see what's in the old bait can.

HE takes food from the lunch pail, hands HER a
piece of fruit, and starts to eat.

KATHERINE and REESE step out of REESE's
office, move DSL. HE is eating something.

The THREE GROUPS engage in overlapping
conversations.

SEAMUS

Ye'd best be comin' to yer senses about Crush.

MARGARET

You don't want me to be happy!

SEAMUS

I'm only lookin' out for you.

REESE

(to Katherine)

I just want what's best for my
little girl.

WILLIE
(to MARCUS)
Here's how we'll do it.

MARGARET
I can look out for myself.

KATHERINE
I'm not your little girl.

WILLIE
Little girls, little boys, husbands,
wives, sweethearts—they'll come
from miles around.

SEAMUS
Stay away from Crush. He's
bad for you.

REESE
Willie's a good man. You could
do lots worse.

SEAMUS
He's a dreamer.

KATHERINE
He's a dreamer.

MARGARET
What's wrong with having a dream?

REESE
But he makes his dreams come
true.

WILLIE
I dream about it every night. It'll
be the greatest event in railroad
history.

REESE
He's a good, clean man.

SEAMUS
He never gets his hands dirty.

WILLIE
I'll work right beside you, every step of the way.

SEAMUS

I won't have him for a son.

MARGARET

Did I say I wanted to marry him?

REESE

He's like a son to me.

KATHERINE

Then adopt him! But don't expect me to marry him!

SEAMUS

You would if he asked you!

REESE

Not even if he asked you?

WILLIE

I've got to ask you, one last time.
Will the boilers explode?

MARGARET

NO!

NO!

MARCUS

KATHERINE

NO!

SEAMUS

YES! Sure an' they will explode! Sure as God made green apples!

A WHISTLE ends lunch. MARGARET storms off.
SEAMUS exits. WILLIE and MARCUS enter the
ticket office and close the door.

KATHERINE and REESE continue their
conversation

KATHERINE

Please don't try to run my life!

REESE

I don't mean to, Katy.

KATHERINE

And don't call me Katy. That's your railroad, not your daughter.

REESE

Katherine.... But I won't live forever. I want to be sure you're provided for.

I'm working.

KATHERINE

A teacher's salary doesn't go far.

REESE

I'm doing the best I can!

KATHERINE

I know, Sweetheart.... Look, you won't need to worry about anything. Your mother and I are putting something aside for you—

REESE

I appreciate that but—

KATHERINE

. . . and any future grandchildren.

REESE

I'm not some cow you can breed with your prize bull!

KATHERINE

I meant no such thing!

REESE

You think because I'm 26, with no prospects—

KATHERINE

You've had plenty.

REESE

When—IF—I decide to marry, I'll choose my own husband! As for Willie Crush, how could I ever think of having children with him when he's such a child himself?

KATHERINE

WILLIE comes out of the office as SHE exits.

Afternoon, Ma'am.

WILLIE

SHE sails past HIM.

(to Reese)
Well, her feathers are ruffled!

WILLIE

She'll be fine.

REESE

WILLIE

I've been wanting to ask you. May I call on her?

REESE

Nothing would please me more. But I can't say the same for her. She doesn't seem to like you.

WILLIE

She likes me fine. She just doesn't want to admit it. . . . I hope.

REESE

I've never seen you show doubt before. Nor Katherine. You're both so strong-willed.

WILLIE

Forbid her to see me. She'll do the opposite. She wants to make her own decisions.

REESE

You know her that well?

WILLIE

Just don't make her suspicious. Be subtle.

REESE

I'll tell her you're a daydreaming loafer who'll never amount to anything.

WILLIE

She already knows that.

MARCUS brings a telegram to REESE.

REESE

(reading the telegram)

The board has voted. . . .

WILLIE

Yessir?

REESE

Just one vote made the difference. . . Probably Daniel James. . .

WILLIE

Yessir? Yessir? Yessir?

REESE

They've approved!

WILLIE is exultant on the

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 3

Time: Early August 1896

Place: The same

Lights up on WILLIE and MARCUS, going through a pile of newspapers.

MARCUS hands papers to WILLIE as he calls off titles. WILLIE looks at each one in turn and places it on the stack.

MARCUS

Look at this headline: "Duel of the Iron Monsters."

WILLIE

Let's use that on our posters. What else?

MARCUS

A lot from Texas, as expected. *Dallas Morning News*. . . *Dallas Times Herald* . . . *Galveston Daily News* . . . *El Paso Times* . . . *Houston Chronicle*. . . Here's Missouri: *Sedalia Daily Democrat*.

WILLIE

That town pretty much owes its existence to the Katy. Got Kansas too?

MARCUS digs through a few more papers and nods. Then he lifts another paper and chuckles.

MARCUS

Here's your name in headlines: "Crush counts on crash to crush trains."

WILLIE

Somebody really printed that?

(rifling through other papers in the stack)

Missouri, Kansas, Texas. All expected. Ah. The *Chicago Tribune*. Good.

MARCUS

I thought we were only covering "Kansas to the Gulf states."

WILLIE

The sky's the limit! People will come from Chicago, New York, California and points between.

The PHONE in WILLIE's office RINGS.
HE answers while MARCUS listens, amused.

WILLIE

Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. General passenger agent Crush speaking. . . Hello, Mr. Braxton. Which newspaper are you with? . . . Yes, I can confirm that we're presenting a monster crash on September 15 We haven't picked the site. . . . Anywhere the Katy has track. . . The wreck is much more than entertainment. It's also a scientific experiment. We'll have all of our engineers and technical experts watching. And a whole battery of cameras to record every second of the crash. Our team of experts will analyze the photos to determine any weak points in the structure of our steam locomotives. The result will be an even safer design. . . . Yes, it does make a lot of sense. . . . You won't want to miss a minute. It'll be the greatest wreck in history. . . . Good. I'll see you there.

As HE hangs up, MARCUS bursts out laughing.
Outside, SEAMUS works near the shed.

MARCUS

"Scientific experiment"??? . . . "Team of experts"???

WILLIE

Anybody can plan a wreck. Ours will be much, much more. . . Where do we stand on poster design?

MARCUS

They'll be big, bright red and beautiful . . . but we're missing a minor detail: the place.

WILLIE

We'll resolve that this week. . . . We only have six weeks! Think we can do it?

MARGARET enters with JARVIS DEANE.

MARCUS

Sure, if we give up running the railroad, seeing our families, eating and sleeping.

WILLIE

Marcus, I knew I could count on you.

WILLIE and MARCUS exit.

SEAMUS

(to Margaret, angrily)

Margaret, I thought ye were goin' home.

MARGARET

I'm helping someone!

(to Willie)

This gentleman has been asking for you, Willie.

JARVIS offers his hand to WILLIE.

JARVIS

I'm Jarvis Deane, Waco's best photographer. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Crush.

WILLIE

(taking his hand)
Mr. Deane. Call me Willie.

JARVIS

Yes Sir. Call me Jarvis. I heard about your monster crash, Willie. You'll make history.

WILLIE

I'd like to think so, Jarvis.

JARVIS

You need a photographic record for your children—

MARGARET

(coyly)
Willie isn't married... yet.

WILLIE

For posterity! I need a photographer to document the wreck, capture all the excitement! The grandeur! The huge crowds! It will be the biggest event in the history of ... wherever we hold it.

JARVIS

Not Texas?

WILLIE

Could be anywhere the Katy runs. . . Missouri, Kansas, Texas. . . except the Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Too many robberies there. We need a peaceful spot with Katy tracks nearby. A flat, open prairie with land sloping in on the sides. Like the Coliseum. We'll lay a special run of track right down the middle.

JARVIS

A Coliseum with railroad tracks? Where's my camera?

WILLIE

Jarvis, you and I are going to get along real fine. But it might take a while to find our Coliseum.

JARVIS

Maybe I saw it on my ride up here. About 16 miles north of Waco. . . . South of West. You have a map?

WILLIE

In my office. Let's take a look. I'll call our Waco agent.

WILLIE enters the office and places a phone call.
JARVIS waits outside, where MARGARET loiters.
THEY mime a bashful conversation. SEAMUS
keeps a watchful eye on MARGARET.