

## Northfield's Jesse James story comes to Twin Cities stage as a musical

By PAMELA THOMPSON [pamela.thompson@apgsomn.com](mailto:pamela.thompson@apgsomn.com)  
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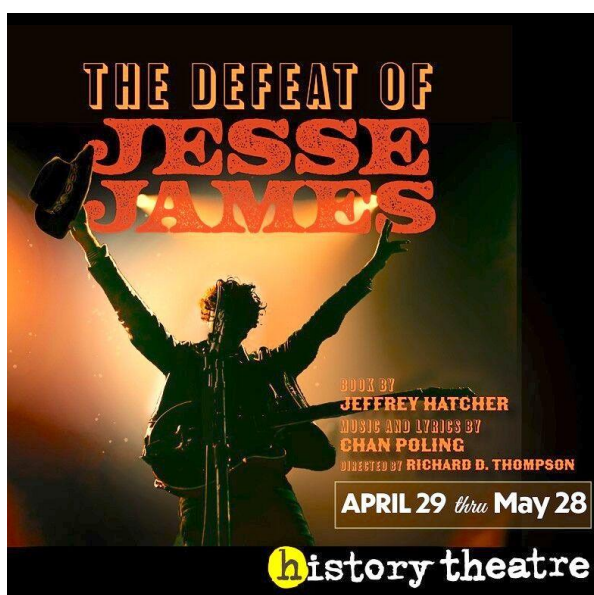
Hatcher



Poling



Thompson



A publicity poster for the upcoming "The Defeat of Jesse James" production. (Photo courtesy of the History Theatre)

In a mix of Honky Tonk Cabaret and Wild West, notorious desperado Jesse James steps out of the shadows of history and onto a stage to sing about his dramatic rise and fall.

In a Zoom call with Hatcher, Poling and History Theatre director Rick Thompson, the men behind the original musical discussed the back story of turning a historical event into a full-scale theatrical production.

"It was a twisty road," recalled Poling. First, there was the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, there were the protests after the George Floyd murder. Later, there were changes to the script after a workshop. "The dynamics of the last few years factored in."

So, the team went to work, trying to figure out how to make a notorious outlaw into a lead character.

"That was a difficult knot to untie," said Hatcher. "So, we came up with the notion that a bank robber could be a rockstar if his gang was like a band."

After three, perhaps four workshops testing this theory, the creators came up with a set list of songs based on the idea that Jesse James was performing his last show, a farewell tour.

"We hear him tell his story," said Hatcher. "We try to control the narrative by making the first act his journey to Northfield, and the second act about the righteous, charming and funny local heroes there."

As they did with "Glensheen," which was about the mysterious murder of a wealthy member of Duluth society, Hatcher and Poling started with the skeletal structure of the story and added in song moments.

Some song moments in "Defeat" focus on the bushwacking gang, Jesse's wife Zerelda and his mother, also Zerelda, who were second cousins, and Jesse's time on the road between bank robberies.

"We wanted to use contemporary framing, not language from the 1870s," he said. "We wink at the audience in a presentational way to bring the audience on our side."

This theatrical framing device is similar to that used in other historical musicals, such as "Music Man" and "Camelot."

Hatcher, who said he visited Northfield twice for research purposes, said touring the First National Bank and the Northfield Historical Society Museum was helpful. Poling said he'd been here to witness a bank robbery reenactment during a recent DJJD festival.

But that's where the creators decided to draw the line between history and stagecraft: no horses and no guns.

"We decided there was no way to realistically recreate the bank raid without it looking like a cheap movie version," said Hatcher. "So we did it theatrically with music, lights and movement."

Poling said during the production meetings, the team decided they did not want to hear 50 gunshots go off.

"It's too damn loud," he said. "We didn't want it to be like an early western with so many guns going off. We didn't want to hear that; it's traumatizing."

Tackling the story of an attractive rebel figure like Jesse James, who, through the years, has garnered iconic, almost cult status, was challenging but not intimidating, they explained. Many popular musicals, namely "Sweeney Todd," "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Chicago" shine the spotlight on a "bad guy" in the lead role.

"Jesse James had many layers," said Hatcher. "He was so young and complex. He was going through the trauma of youth, almost frozen in permanent adolescence."

The creators said they want the audience to be entertained, but also to think about the history as they tell the familiar story on stage.

"I used his actual words in the song lyrics," said Poling. "His words came verbatim from his letters."

Thompson, who is new in his role as director of the History Theatre, said that the image of a romantic cowboy rocker from the American West springs to mind after seeing this version of Jesse James.

"A gunslinger along the lines of Brando, Dean, Newman and Dylan," he said.

### IF YOU GO

"The Defeat of Jesse James" opens April 29 and runs through May 28 at the History Theatre, 30 10th St. E. in St. Paul. Box office is open Tuesday-Friday, noon-5 p.m. Tickets can be purchased on the website at [boxofc@historytheatre.com](mailto:boxofc@historytheatre.com) or by calling 651-292-4323.

On Thursday, May 25, FiftyNorth is sponsoring a bus and performance package for \$80. The bus, with a capacity of 20, leaves at 6 p.m. and returns at 11 p.m. Contact Michelle Loken for tickets at [michelle.loken@fiftynorth.org](mailto:michelle.loken@fiftynorth.org)

Rice County Historical Society is sponsoring a "Defeat of Jesse James" bus tour on Thursday, April 27. The bus loads at 3:15 p.m. and leaves at 3:30 p.m. from the Faribault office at 1814 Second Ave. NW. Tickets are \$55 per person. Reservations will be taken through April 7. Slots are limited so call 507-332-2121 or email [rchs@rchistory.org](mailto:rchs@rchistory.org) to reserve your spot.