

# The Desperate Deed

*By Dennis Knight*

The zenith of my acting career, in fact, the entirety of my acting career came in 1957 in *The Desperate Deed* on the rattling wooden roll-out stage of Saint Laurence School in Laramie. I was in the eighth grade, the highest level at our school, and it was a new work written and produced by our school's principal, the slyly irreverent Sister Mary Sarah.

It was a turn-of-the-century melodrama replete with villain, damsel in distress, valiant hero (me), musical numbers by our school choir, and a floradora dance line featuring boys dressed up like Mae West in gaudy and curvy costumes. I know Sister's casting choice was an example of her sense of fun because there were certainly girls available, and they were prettier than us.

I was one of the floradora dancers, and then I had a quick costume change to accommodate my other, principle role as the boy "detective" (Sister's word) who rescued the lovely heroin and brought the villain to justice. I believe I was handpicked for talent, but it may have been that I was by far the shortest in the room and could pass for a lad amid other fourteen-year-olds in roles of adults. My curly, dashing good looks were a bonus.

My friend, Roger Morgan played the tall, mustachioed villain. The script dictated that, at the climactic moment when the scoundrel had me in his grasp to block the rescue, I would feint a stomp to his foot. Roger would howl, and with him in pursuit I would dash off to free the lovely damsel just as she approached the screeching buzz saw. We practiced several times to perfect the stomp, dash and rescue, but right after the final dress rehearsal, I gleefully added a secret wrinkle.

The play went off brilliantly before a full house in the school gymnasium. The gay nineties songs were cheerful, the dancers were in step, the jokes were funny, and the audience was caught up in the drama. The suspense built through several acts to the instance of the feigned stomp when I added my secret wrinkle by instead delivering the crunching blow directly to Roger's big toe with everything I had.

Roger's howl was now genuine and it exceeded all expectations, startling our cohorts on stage, alarming Sister Mary Sarah in the wings, and greatly entertaining the audience. Roger grabbed for my shoulder, I ducked and darted to the damsel in distress, and Roger hopped after me in pursuit. That hopping part was definitely ad lib. He had never done it in rehearsal, and it was a nice touch. The audience loved it.

The show came to the scripted happy ending and we took bows to what I remember as a standing ovation. I believe I got the best laugh of the night, Roger got a purple toe award, and we both deserved best actor trophies. Backstage after the curtain calls, Roger caught up to me for real and I vainly tried to plead remorse while doubled in laughter. He wasn't sharing the mirth but, in retrospect, I would say he should have considered himself lucky for having survived the night. Sister might have written the play with a gun in my hand.