

MOUNTAIN DAYS: THE JOHN MUIR MUSICAL

SYNOPSIS



It is night. A darkened room. An old man is asleep at his desk, pen in hand. Behind him the silhouette of a woman enters, straightens his papers and gently strokes his hair. He awakens with a start as she fades away. The man is famous naturalist John Muir, in his "scribble den" in his Martinez home, writing down for posterity his thoughts and opinions formed over 73 years of wandering and pondering nature and God's great universe. He pauses, and muses about how he, "a tramp, a vagabond without worldly ambition" should become so well known. How did it happen?

"As a lad in Scotland," he says, "all I wanted was freedom - the kind which could only be found high above the schools and kirks and squabble of the streets of Dunbar - so every chance I got."

Immediately we are transported to Dunbar, Scotland. It is a spring afternoon in 1849, and a boy is perched precariously on the pitched roof of a cottage. It is John Muir, valiantly, inching his way to the top.

I WANT TO TOUCH THE SKY
CLIMB TO HEIGHTS WHERE I'VE NEVER BEEN
AND AVERAGE MEN WILL NEVER KNOW

His reverie is broken by the entrance of his father, Daniel Muir, a devout minister and stern disciplinarian. He shouts in his angry Scottish brogue.

"John Muir! Coom away doon from that roof ye fightin', bitin', climbin' pagan! We're gan to America, where a mon can worship as he pleases; where the streets are paved wi' gold!"

Immediately throngs of immigrants appear, belongings in hand, to the wharf of Glasgow. They sing about their new life in America as the Muir family joins them and boards their ship.

Night falls and a fierce storm tosses the ship. Young John emerges from behind a barrel and looks up at the mast. He grabs hold of the mast and starts to climb.

The other immigrants come on deck and sing of their ambition in counterpoint to John's hymn to the sky.

The ship lurches with another wave and John loses his grip and falls as the scene shifts to Fountain Lake, the Muir family farm in Wisconsin.

John is a young man, and in charge of the new family farm "Hickory Hill," as his father has decided to devote all his time to preaching. John shows his younger brother, Davey, a "labor-saving" device he has invented - his "early-rising machine" - that will keep time, light the fire and wake him by dumping him out of his bed in the morning. (CURIOUS MACHINES) Davey loves it, and John shows other inventions: hydrometers, pyrometers, a clock he has mounted on the barn with fourteen foot hands so all the neighbors can see the time from the road.

Soon we are at the Wisconsin State Fair of 1860, and John has won first prize for his inventions. He is invited by Mr. And Mrs. Ezra and Jean Carr to live with them in exchange for odd jobs. The Carrs open their extensive library to him and promise to see to his formal education at the University of Wisconsin, where Professor Carr is a faculty member. They see in him an extraordinary young man. (EVERY NOW AND THEN)

It is late at night, several years later, and John is working in a factory in Indianapolis, surrounded by workers toiling away at their laborious tasks. Although he is warned to be careful by a co-worker, his hands lose their grip on the file he is working with, and it flies up and strikes his eye. John screams and is plunged into darkness.

John makes a promise that if his sight is restored, he'll never work on a machine again, but will devote his life to the inventions of God. Gradually, he tells us, "the dark became lighter, shadows became faces and the warmth on my face became the sun."

John bids good-bye to his family and embarks on his first great adventure, the THOUSAND MILE WALK. He travels from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, meeting miners, farmers, Civil War soldiers on their way home through a ruined south. At the end of his journey he has determined the philosophy that will carry him through his days, and he sings:

WE'RE ALL MADE OF THE SAME DUST
MAN, AND TREE AND MOUNTAIN
COVERED BY THE SAME SKY

The scene shifts to the port of San Francisco, circa 1868. John has just arrived via a tramp steamer, and is immediately swept up in the hustle and bustle of the booming gold rush town, as gamblers, barkers and Bowery Ladies sing of their favorite town - SAN FRANCISCO.

John and his traveling companion, an ambitious Cockney fellow by the name of Chilwell, escape the suffocating madness of the city for the high Sierra, where there is rumor of something greater than gold. They enter the Yosemite Valley, where John, for the first time, beholds the magnificent splendor. He tells Chilwell, "I'm home!" With the roar of Yosemite Falls thundering above them, they sing the beautiful hymn: CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS

It is now two years later, and John is working as a wilderness guide for hotel owner James Hutchings. A bevy of San Francisco society ladies arrive, having read a breast-beating romantic account of the wilderness experience by Countess Yelverton. They all request the dashing Mr. Muir for their guide (WHAT A LARK GETTING BACK TO NATURE). John escapes in terror to his mountain perch home, which he calls "the hanging nest."

Jean Carr has meanwhile moved to a home in the Oakland Hills, and invites John to tea. After declining repeatedly, he reluctantly appears, hat in hand, where he is immediately ushered out to the balcony where a young lady, attempting to retrieve her dropped spectacles, has found herself perched precariously on the edge of a rock-like cliff. She calms herself by reciting John's writings about Yosemite:

Looking at Yosemite falls from this fissured point, towards noon in the spring, the rainbow on its brow seems to be broken up and mingled with rushing comets until the fall is stained with colors forming one of the most glorious sights conceivable.

John overhears, coming to her rescue. They sing of their close encounter (IT'S GOT TO BE THE ALTITUDE) and, as he takes his leave, he asks her name. "Strentzel - Louie Strentzel," she replies.

We next find John in his "hanging nest," suffering from writer's block, able to think of nothing but the intriguing Miss Strentzel. When a Scottish artist, William Keith, arrives, looking for a guide to show him some scenes of Yosemite that he might paint, John decides that this is exactly what he needs to get Louie off his mind. He climbs higher and higher, up mountains, rocky cliffs and even mighty redwoods; the act ends as John discovers that no matter where he goes THE WOMAN'S STILL ON MY MIND.

As Act 2 opens, we find ourselves at the Strentzel ranch and adobe in Martinez, California. Louie and her father are strolling through the orchard, discussing, among other things, the mysterious Mr. Muir, when Dr. Strentzel spots a vagrant coming up the drive.

"That's no vagrant," says Louie, "That's the man I'm going to marry!"

John describes how he just happened to arrive in Martinez after a 250 mile trip on a raft down the Merced and San Joaquin rivers, and the two happily retreat to the house, hand in hand.

We immediately see the San Francisco ladies who hounded John out of Yosemite, having tea and commenting cattily on the rumors of a romance between John and Louie (LOVE'S IN BLOOM IN MARTINEZ). The song follows their three year courtship - interrupted by John's travels to Nevada and Alaska - and ends as the couple is married.

The scene shifts to John, in his "scribble den" in their large Victorian home in Martinez, as he ruefully tells Keith about his lost freedom, now that he has a large farm and 40 hands to manage and feed. And to make matters worse, Louie has decided to throw a garden party.

High society gentlemen and ladies swirl on the lawn to the lilting tune of the POLITICAL WALTZ, as a group of San Francisco politicians, including Gifford Pinchot and Phalen, bemoan Muir's formation of a new conservationist group - the Sierra Club.

The waltz (and the party!) end when John becomes enraged after overhearing the politicians discussing a plan to dam the Hetch Hetchy valley in Yosemite National Park to provide water to San Francisco, and throws them all out of the house.

Louie, aware of the fact that running the farm is destroying the man she loves, urges him to return to his beloved Yosemite for awhile. (LOVE IS KNOWING WHEN TO LET YOU GO)

The scene shifts to the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias, where President Teddy Roosevelt has agreed to meet with Muir to discuss the protection of the magnificent trees - which are being

dynamited by the hundreds to provide lumber for pasture fences. Under the stars in the glorious setting, Roosevelt is so taken with Muir he expresses his delight in song. (BULLY)

It is the following year, 1904, and Louie is passionately playing the piano while John once again decries the plan to dam Hetch Hetchy. To get his mind off the problem, she sends him out to play with their young daughters, Helen and Wanda, while she watches from an upstairs window and sings of the joy of ORDINARY THINGS.

John departs on a trip across Europe and Asia, while Louie stays behind to mind the farm, but a telegram from a doctor brings him back to Martinez, to find Louie gravely ill, suffering from a tumor on her lung. While John recites the passage about the rainbow in Yosemite she remembered from that balcony meeting so long ago, Louie quietly dies.

It is several weeks later, and Helen enters, entreating John to resume his writing, and reminding him of how angry Louie would be if she knew she was the cause of his silence. Before he can respond, the house shakes with an earthquake. John and the girls run to the lawn, and ride out the quake, only to see a plume of angry black smoke rise from the direction of San Francisco!

The lack of water to fight the fire, and the destruction of San Francisco redoubles the effort to find a new water supply. John takes on his final battle - a seven year effort to prevent the damming of his beloved Hetch Hetchy valley - A VALLEY HAS A SOUL. But, with Roosevelt out of the White House, and some shady behind-the-scenes deal-making, the Raker Bill authorizing the dam passes.

John, defeated and feeling like his life's work has come to nothing, lies gravely ill in a hospital room in Los Angeles. While the ghosts of his past - farmers in Wisconsin, politicians, all Americans - waltz through his mind, Louie appears, and reminds him that "words live forever. You may have lost a battle, John, but you won a war."

She picks up the final paper he has been working on, and sings the words:

CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS
GET THEIR GLAD TIDINGS
NATURE'S PEACE WILL FILL YOUR SOUL
WALK THE WOODS, SMELL THE AIR
AND SORROW AND CARE
OF LIVING WILL EASE
BLOWN AWAY WITH THE BREEZE.

As John joins her, a child dressed in 1920's clothing takes up her song, then a family in 1940's clothes, and all the decades to today, until the stage is filled with people of all ages and nations and times singing John's words and carrying the message to the future:

CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS
GET THEIR GLAD TIDINGS
LEARN TO WANDER
THE REST OF YOUR DAYS
FIND A MEADOW TO PLAY IN
A FOREST TO PRAY IN
LEAVE YOUR CIVILIZED STRIFE
FOR A FOUNTAIN OF LIFE.