

HIGH PLAINS FANDANGO: A PLAY by Red Shuttleworth.
Humanitas Media, 2015. 161 pp. \$14.99. ISBN 9780991203734

Reviewed by Robert P. Moreira

In *High Plains Fandango*, what lurks beneath for the characters involved runs deeper than the waters of the famed Ogallala aquifer. Human beings thirst in *High Plains*—for love, sex, money, redemption, real estate, and, yes, for water—and in their parched plights provide incisive social commentary on contemporary issues impacting the US heartland, such as commercialism, unfair business tactics, and water rights. Wrought in Shuttleworth’s penetrating tragicomic style, *High Plains* is a modern drama that eschews predictability for much more than a watered-down collection of twenty-three didactic scenes. In fact, while *High Plains* leaves little doubt that the Ogallala aquifer remains a vast source of life-sustaining water ripe for privatization and exploitation, the rapids of this play are in the blood, tears, and dreams of the characters, with little else left for readers to do than hold on for dear life and see the waves through.

The setting of *High Plains* is a forgotten, thirsty town in western Nebraska “suffering from youth drain” (46), according to Hooley, the cantankerous, abusive owner of the local sundries store of the same name. Along with Louie and Isabelle, owners of the dilapidated Roche Motel, plans are discussed to remake the town into a tourist attraction, complete with Old West reenactments and even a High Plains Film Festival, all in an effort to make the town viable again, and to increase the flow of tourism and dollars. To make this happen, the town establishes a development council, a group which O’Garr, a powerful rancher and traditionalist, disagrees with, especially after learning his wife, Cinthia, has been elected vice president to the council. O’Garr represents the quintessential cowboy in this modern-day tragedy (a much more talkative doppelganger of *The Stranger* in the 1973 film *High Plains Drifter*), a man much more interested in calving season than in the town’s future, yet his love for his town is undeniable. Through O’Garr, *High Plains* teaches that progress today can not only be an invasive, profit-driven pitfall but takes different forms. Most importantly, progressive individuals can and will kill for the privilege of witnessing or enacting this change. The two characters

that antagonize each other like oil and water are O’Garr and the newcomer to town, Ken Adams. A West Point graduate-turned-heartland carpet bagger, Ken’s mantra is “water is the liquid of the 21st century” (72), and his flirtatious advances towards Waitress and Aquinas, Hooley’s wife, only complement his Machiavellian plans to swindle the locals out of their properties from the abandoned missile silo he lives in. Unlike the desperate townspeople, O’Garr sees straight through Ken’s intentions. O’Garr’s punishment of Ken is ruthless and bloody at the end of the play, and in this intervention O’Garr rises from his status quo attitude, throwing the gauntlet down at readers by intimating the following question: If it was your home that thirsted, how far would you go to give it the drink it desires?

In addition to O’Garr and Ken, several other unique tributaries feed the rough yet engaging waters of *High Plains*. The teens Moss and DQ, the “modern day Adam and Eve” (63) of the play, wander the wasteland of this Nebraska town, their only sin the fact that no one wants them. There’s Waitress as well, O’Garr’s former lover, who gives in to Ken’s advances but leaves little doubt as to where her allegiances truly lie. Finally, there are the two troubled souls who finally get to drink from the well of salvation that has evaded them the entire play—Aquinas and Father Ben. Shuttleworth feeds the sacred waters of *High Plains* through these two characters. Father Ben and Aquinas are like thin rivulets rolling up and down rough terrains, searching for rejuvenation, restoration, and solace. The most enduring ripples in *High Plains*, however, are those conjured by Aquinas. She represents a pivotal, complex female character that embodies the town’s psychosexual tensions, as well as the objective correlative that Shuttleworth employs to examine the play’s central themes. In the end, *High Plains* was a quick read, but like all drama, the true magic occurs onstage. I’ll be recommending this play to the Theater Department at my university soon. For those of you thirsty for more, you may find on YouTube a short video of Shuttleworth discussing the premiere of *High Plains Fandango* in 2012.