

**Aiming for Broadway, Night of the Hunter, the Musical, First Holes Up in California, Fall 2004**  
**By Kenneth Jones**  
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The Night of the Hunter, the dark and hopeful musical about good, evil, greed, murder and the resilience of children, is aiming for Broadway and will have its first staging in that direction in September 2004, at the Willows Theatre in Concord, California.

The show based on the story and film of the same name has music by the late Claibe Richardson (The Grass Harp) and book and lyrics by Stephen Cole (After the Fair). John Bowab produces and directs.

Bowab was the original associate producer of Mame and Sweet Charity and is known for directing for the stage (the 1983 Angela Lansbury revival of Mame, among others) and TV ("Golden Girls," "Cosby Show"). Bowab's plan is to develop the award-winning The Night of the Hunter at the Willows (which has a Broadway-size stage) and at other theatres before bringing it to Broadway in 2005 or 2006.

Previews begin at the Willows Sept. 20, 2004, opening Sept 24, 2004. Performances continue to Oct. 24.

Ray Klausen (recent designer of the acclaimed revival of Big River) will design the set. David Evans will act as music supervisor as he did for the April 2003 workshop presentations in Manhattan. Musical staging is by Diana Baffa, who also staged the '83 revival of Mame starring Lansbury.

Casting is still in the works, but Julie Johnson will re-create the role of Willa Harper (played in the film by Shelley Winters). Johnson played the role in the 2003 Manhattan workshop.

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In the April 2003 workshop presentations Ron Raines starred as the menacing Preacher.

Lyricist-librettist Stephen Cole won a 2000 Kleban Award for the work, and the piece earned an NEA grant for development.

A 1998 concept cast album of the score (on the Fynsworth Alley label) spread word of the West Virginia-set show, and Warner Bros. published the vocal selections, further raising the profile. The libretto is drawn from Davis Grubb's 1953 novel, which inspired the film.

The April cast included Ron Raines ("Guiding Light") as The Preacher (reprising his concept album work), Beth Fowler (Beauty and the Beast) as Rachel Cooper, Julie Johnson (Das Barbeque) as Willa Harper, Mary Stout (Jane Eyre, Beauty and the Beast) as Icey Spoon, George Lee Andrews (The Phantom of the Opera) as Walt Spoon, Gordon Joseph Weiss (Ghetto) as Uncle Birdie, Ricky Ashley as John Harper, Jennifer Michelle Brown as Pearl Harper, Brian Noonan as Ben Harper, Tina Johnson (Best Little Whorehouse, Casper) as Miz Cunningham, Gloria Hodes as Nellie, Taylor Giacomo as Ruby, Samantha Meckes as Mary Samantha Blinks as Clary, with Gregg Goodbrod, G. Shane Peterman and David Lowenstein.

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The dark tale is about an ex-con who calls himself The Preacher and comes to the widow Willa Harper, seeking money that her hanged husband hid in a doll that belongs to daughter Pearl. Young son John is suspicious of The Preacher. When The Preacher brings violence to the family, the children flee and end up in the care of widow Rachel Cooper. A final confrontation brings the children to a new and more hopeful place in their lives (at Christmastime, no less).

The novel was made into a classic film noir directed by Charles Laughton and starring Robert Mitchum as the thug who has the words "love" and "hate" tattooed on his knuckles.

Richardson, who died of cancer in January 2003, had "long harbored an ambition to make a musical of 'The Night of the Hunter,' and after we screened the film version and read the incredibly rich novel from which it was derived, we agreed to set to work on musicalizing a piece that was one part thriller, one part religious allegory and two parts heartwarming coming-of-age story," Cole wrote in liner notes of the 1998 album.

"As soon as I read the novel I knew that this was a musical," Cole told Playbill On-Line. "Despite the obvious thriller aspects of a Preacher killing widows for their money, the story and characters had such depth and warmth. It's really a battle between good and evil. The story is really the battle between this evil man and the little boy he is hunting. And it's a story of the ability of little children to endure and abide. So what we had was an exciting thriller and a

warm coming of age story at the same time. The characters just had to sing. Words from the novel jumped out at me and became lyrics and with Claibe's classically country-flavored score it became a music theatre piece unlike others. Claibe, being from the south, knew these people and could make their music soar. We inspired each other to write more than just songs...there are long sequences of music, underscored scenes...songs, almost arias..."

The show was previously workshopped at The Vineyard Theatre (directed by Lonny Price) and the Goodman Theatre (directed by Robert Falls).

At the time of his death, Richardson knew the 2003 workshop was planned. The piece has been refined over the years, Cole said, as recently 2002 (with tweaks in early 2003).

The Willows Theatre Company will also stage *Annie*, *Children of Eden*, *Treasure Island* and *The Solid Gold Cadillac* in 2004. For more information, visit [www.willowstheatre.com](http://www.willowstheatre.com).