

“DRIVING HERD”

A SHORT PLAY BY SAM GRABER

ESTIMATED RUN TIME – 10 MINUTES

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## **SUMMARY**

Today’s Dad, driving his youngsters across the Mall Of America to reach the shoe store, is helped by yesterday’s Cowboy.

## **CHARACTERS**

COWBOY, male, in his strong, strapping 30s

DAD, mid 30s, unshaven, out of shape, tired.

## **TIME**

The present.

## **SETTING**

The theme park in the center of the Mall Of America.

At downstage right is a child’s sippy cup.

## **FIRST PERFORMANCE**

*Driving Herd* was first performed at Between Us Productions’ Take Ten Festival in NYC during March 2013 as directed by Vincent Scott with the following cast:

- James Wilcox as DAD
- Juan Carlos Diaz as COWBOY

## THE PLAY

*We hear the soundscape of the Mall Of America indoor theme park. Carnival rides, crowd chatter, children playing. This sound collage fades and morphs into the lonely waft of a single, lilting harmonica. The harmonica cascades into a resolving note that is picked up and carried forward by an acoustic guitar. The harmonica and guitar continue together, as if echoing the rugged sonic that personified American Man on the frontier.*

*COWBOY enters, wearing traditional raiment: a dusty brim hat, buttoned jeans shirt, leather rawhide over dungarees, and pearl boots which clatter on the floor.*

*COWBOY saunters authoritatively to downstage right, knocks back his hat and looks around, to see if anyone’s coming. His boot knocks into the child’s sippy cup. COWBOY leans down and picks it up, turns it over in his hands.*

### COWBOY

The cowboy used to be a mighty figure in these parts. Open prairie under summer sun meant easy traveling so as to drive west the herd. That’s what I did in my time, drove west the herd. But I’m not talking ‘bout moo cow or steer for slaughter. I’m talking ‘bout my toddlers, sitting quietly behind me in the rolling wagon whilst I scouted for land to build a home. After the missus passed it was just me tending to my two small fries, the three of us rolling through vast meadows, past bluestem grass reaching up to eight feet tall. My daughter looked for eagles and my boy had his hands thick in rootstock. Prairie roots grow longer underground than the plant does tall above it. When night arrived I’d rest their tiny frames on white straw aside the campfire. I’d watch ‘em sleep under the husky moonlight.

*The harmonica and guitar fade.*

COWBOY

Well. Times have changed but the cowboy is still extant, you know, still in some ways a mighty figure, still herdin' west his progeny.

*DAD enters, pushing a massive double stroller laden with diaper bags, jackets, food remnants, toys dangling everywhere. DAD wears a stained, button-down shirt half-tucked into worn khakis, and an athletic cap trying to hide frontal balding.*

DAD

Put that down get away from there that's breakable stop eating that that's not allowed get that out of your mouth put that back in your mouth we don't throw that on the ground absolutely not I don't care what he did you're older and you should know better because you're too small that's why do not run away from me excuse me where do you think you're going and I mean this instant right now right now right now I'm not going to tell you again I'm not going to tell you again I'm not going to tell you ONE...don't make me put you back in this stroller.

COWBOY

The Mall Of America. Where today's rancheroo herds his brood west. Biggest mall in the commonwealth, they say, where the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers collide. Three full floors of mercantilism, a picture hall, hotel, even an underground prison.

DAD

No.

COWBOY

An indoor theme park for the kids.

DAD

I said no.

COWBOY

Roller coaster rides and Ferris wheels.

DAD

Because we're going to the shoe store, that's why.

COWBOY

All meant to derail from the sanctity of simple purpose.

DAD

Shoe. Store.

COWBOY

Mostly to reach that yonder shoe depot, outfit their critters with fancy footwear so the metropolitan family can dine in style.

DAD

Because Mom said no Red Lobster until new shoes. So let's go.

COWBOY

Herd 'em west.

DAD

I said let's go!

COWBOY

Yah!

DAD

Shoe store!

COWBOY

Roll 'em out!

DAD

That way!

COWBOY

Across the great Mall divide!

DAD

Wait, what?

COWBOY

Whoa, stop!

DAD

Okay, fine. One ride.

COWBOY

Distraction is a common element 'round these parts.

DAD

One ride on Flying Bus and that's it.

COWBOY

Used to be my old man would see a single cloud and incarnate a tale about how it was streaking across a blue sky to beat evil out the land 'fore stars shined down. He'd come up with all kinds of stories to keep us occupied. Everything had a name. Everything still has a name, alright.

DAD

Okay, c'mon, everybody pose with Dora. Sorry, *Boots*. Everybody pose with Boots.

COWBOY

Herding west sure has changed.

DAD

Excuse me, we don't take pictures with our hands in front of our faces.

COWBOY

It's like we ain't raising humans no more, just driving 'em from place to place.

DAD

And...got it. Okay, let's go!

COWBOY

Saddle up!

DAD

Let's move!

COWBOY

Yah!

DAD

To the shoe store!

COWBOY

The rolling land!

DAD

The Mall of America!

COWBOY

The porcupine grasses!

DAD

The plastic trees!

COWBOY

The sandy plains!

DAD

The coffee shops!

COWBOY

The fertile soil!

DAD

Wait.

COWBOY

Whoa, hold!

DAD

What do you mean you're thirsty? How can you be thirsty, you just drank half the Mississippi.

COWBOY

Used to be I want a lick of drink, my Daddy'd toss me a pail and tell me to tame a cow.

DAD

That is not how you talk to Daddy.

COWBOY

And any frisky mouthing to the parentals earned a smackin'.

DAD

We don't have time for a smoothie, we have to get to the shoe store. Okay, well, I don't have any tokens. How can I buy a smoothie without a token? I'll buy you a smoothie AFTER we get shoes, okay?

*DAD's cell phone rings.*

DAD

Nobody move for the next thirty seconds! [Answering the phone] Hey...in the theme park...no, we haven't made it to the shoe place yet...[points 'you stand still!']...I can't send you a picture of what they have in stock if we haven't made it to the...what?...speak up, I can't...yeah, it's called the noise generated from a three year old and one year old screaming at the top of their lungs, ask me how I know this...[points 'you stand still!']...I'll call you—get back here!—as soon as I get there but it's like zero signal because Verizon leads the world in suck—I SAID GET BACK HERE—I'll call you back.

*DAD hangs up and fumbles with pocketing the cell.*

DAD

Honey, I told you we're not getting a smoothie until after shoes.

COWBOY

In my day kids didn't have shoes.

DAD

And that's final.

COWBOY

They had feet.

DAD

Hi. One blueberry smoothie, please. Oh. Can you make a smoothie with something that looks like blueberry? That's all she'll drink. Super, whatever, just make it blue. And anything with enough caffeine to kill me.

COWBOY

Used to be the mommas would pop out strongly sized litters. Fourteen kids a household, mortality rate, you know. Now you got modern medicine, most everybody makes it, so two to three youngsters per stroller seems the norm.

DAD

Yes, you can jump on the helicopter while your brother and I wait for the smoothie. Just don't fall off this time.

COWBOY

This used to be my land. Farmer-owned, rancher-proud. The deep orange of butterfly weed in hot midsummer. The gold-red of raspy reeds in fall.

DAD

Excuse me.

COWBOY

Was my land, alright.

DAD

Excuse me, if I could just squeeze through to get the smoothie...

COWBOY

Until them foreigners marched in their encampments.

DAD

Damn Iowans.

COWBOY

Damn Iowans.

DAD

Okay honey, here you go, one blueberry smoothie! What do you mean you don't want it? You know what, nobody gets anything else ever until after the shoe store.

COWBOY

Gotta move on!

DAD

Let's go!

COWBOY

Yah!

DAD

Let's move!

COWBOY

By the ground moraines!

DAD

The waxed floors!

COWBOY

The bog cordgrass!

DAD

The shiny kiosks!

COWBOY

The northern pines!

DAD

The trash bins!

COWBOY

The pure groundwater!

DAD

Wait! Excuse me, we do not touch that in public. [Kneeling] Honey, I don't care what Dora does it is not okay to touch or fondle that in public or I will put you right back in the stroller. I don't want to have to talk about this again.

COWBOY

In my day we didn't have talk.

DAD

And that's final.

COWBOY

We had standoffs with silence.

DAD

Oh, no. [Frantically searching the stroller] Where's the sippy cup?

COWBOY

But God knows it ain't easy.

DAD

Is it in the diaper bag?

COWBOY

Once the most desirable job in America.

DAD

Help me find it.

COWBOY

Currently the most tenuous.

DAD

What do you mean poopy in your underwear?

COWBOY

Forever the most exhausting.

DAD

OH GOD, I WANT A DRINK RIGHT NOW.

COWBOY

The nights when they're sick.

DAD

I WANT TO SCREAM REALLY LOUD AND PISS OFF EVERYBODY.

COWBOY

The days when they're lost.

DAD

I WANT TO THROW AND KICK AND BITE.

COWBOY

You're just tryin' to keep 'em together.

DAD

I WANT TO SIT DOWN AND CRY. I JUST WANT TO SIT DOWN AND CRY.

COWBOY

But a man doesn't talk about it. All we can do is to keep moving west through the weeks, the months, towards that moment when it all gets that much easier.

*COWBOY crosses to DAD, holds out the sippy cup.*

COWBOY

[To DAD] 'Scuse me friend, think your little guy dropped this.

*DAD stares.*

DAD

[Taking, relief] Thanks.

COWBOY

No problem.

DAD

These sippy cups, they just fly right out of the holders.

COWBOY

My time, they wasn't much homogenized.

*Beat.*

DAD

Are you one of the Dora characters?

COWBOY

I don't reckon I am.

DAD

Oh.

COWBOY

Your little girl's quite the runner.

DAD

No kidding. Honey, this nice man found the sippy cup, can you say thank you? Honey, it's okay, when Daddy's here you can talk to strangers. You say thank you.

COWBOY

Hiddy there.

DAD

I got my kids for the afternoon.

COWBOY

I see that often.

DAD

Thanks again. For the cup.

COWBOY

Don't mention it, friend.

*The harmonica and guitar return.*

DAD

Hey, uh, listen, um, you wanna join us? I don't want to sound weird or anything but you just seem like you could benefit from a loud and painful outing at the shoe store.

COWBOY

That's a right kind offer. Most men simply wave and walk on. Your kids are doing right by you. I got to decline on joining, though, need to stick around and make sure the next caravan crosses safely. You just set your stroller straight on that Nordstrom's sign and you'll be just fine.

DAD

Okay. Well. See you around. Alright guys, c'mon, shoe store!

*DAD starts pushing off.*

DAD

[Chanting] Here we go shoe store, here we go! Here we go shoe store, here we go!

*DAD is out.*

*COWBOY readjusts his hat, creases his shirt.*

*COWBOY turns to the opposite offstage, looking, waiting.*

*The guitar and harmonica resolve.*

**END OF PLAY.**