

Judge Dunson's Secret

Program Notes

Abigail Scott Duniway (1834-1915) rose from quite ordinary beginnings as an Illinois farm girl to become a nationally famed champion of women's rights, and a popular author and publisher. Duniway, the best-known woman in Oregon history, was a true pioneer. Her journey to recognition began in 1852 when she traveled to the Pacific Coast by ox-drawn wagon at the age of 17. The hardships endured on the trail by the Scott party were proverbial. Cholera was epidemic, and before they reached Oregon, Abigail's mother and youngest brother had died. But the problems didn't end there.

After her arrival in Oregon, Abigail married, became a schoolteacher, and then began a career as a pioneer farm wife while becoming the mother of six children. When her husband, Ben, went broke and was later injured in an accident, Abigail set out to support her entire family. As a woman, her opportunities were severely limited. She had another try at teaching, but found it to be a lot of work for little pay (at the time, women teachers earned much less than men). And so she started a business making hats and selling notions, and became a success. But in retrospect this achievement paled in comparison to her discovery of her real career. Under the mentorship of her friend, the well-known Susan B. Anthony, Duniway learned the ins and outs of politics, and went on to become a national leader.

In 1871, Duniway began publishing the *New Northwest*, a newspaper devoted to promoting true equality for all human beings. Fueled by their wrath at a government that classed all women with "idiots, insane persons and criminals" when denying them the vote, women like Duniway dared to break the mold and fight. At the time Abigail began her career, women were forbidden much more than just the vote. The situation was worst for married women, who had no legal existence apart from their husbands. They could not sign contracts, had no title to their own earnings, no right to property, nor any claim to their children in case of separation or divorce. When Duniway started to publish the *New Northwest*, married women did not even legally own their own clothes!

One of Duniway's most treasured goals was to win the vote for women in the three states she considered her special territory — Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Despite staunch opposition from some of the most influential men in Oregon (including Abigail's own brother and long-time editor of the Portland *Oregonian*, Harvey Scott), these victories came to pass. Idaho's women won the vote in 1896, followed by Washingtonians in 1910, and, after a number of early near-wins, Oregonians finally achieved victory in 1912, eight years in advance of the passage of the 20th Amendment granting all American women the vote. By the time of Duniway's death in 1915, she had achieved near-legendary status. When the Lewis & Clark Centennial was celebrated in Portland in 1905, it featured an "Abigail Scott Duniway Day," and contemporaries honored her as the quintessential "pioneer mother," as well as the "Mother of Woman Suffrage."

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They say best men are moulded out of faults,
And for the most, become much more the better
For being a little bad; so may my husband.

—Mariana in William Shakespeare's
Measure for Measure (V. i. 438-41)

In 1859, when she was still a young farm wife burdened by infants and never-ceasing household chores — a decade before her entry into publishing and politics — Abigail Scott Duniway penned a fictionalized account of her family's overland trip, *Captain Gray's Company*. This became the first novel to be commercially published in Oregon, and marks Duniway's entry into the larger world beyond that defined by hearthstone and barnyard. Duniway's experiences along the Oregon Trail surfaced time and again in her many novels serialized in the *New Northwest* (1871-1887). Her stories show what life was really like for a "pioneering woman" (whether pioneering in the traditional sense, or pioneering for equal rights). They give us a candid look at the daunting problems experienced by the women of her era, as well as their struggles to overcome them. *Judge Dunson's Secret* is among the best of those stories.

Duniway's serialized novels form a vital record of what life in the "old west" was like from the perspective of an ardent feminist. Standard conventions are reversed. Strong women rescue their menfolk from trouble, and the law enforcers are generally the villains, because they carry out legislation that robs women of their rights. Such is the case in *Judge Dunson's Secret*.

Duniway based *Judge Dunson's Secret* on Shakespeare's macabre comedy *Measure for Measure*. Both stories center around a self-righteous justice with a spotless public reputation who engages in a cruel and heartless act. Such despicable deeds would, in most instances, make a villain, but both stories are shaped by their allusions to scripture: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

The story begs us to consider that the man we see in public often bears little relation to his private self. Duniway implies that because of laws granting men unlimited authority, all of them have secrets. Many among them have been more than "a little bad," and might need to be excused because of the faulty environment they've been reared in. We are also asked to realize that all sorts of terrible misdeeds pervade every nook and cranny of society, and will continue to do so until all people are treated equally.

Ultimately, in *Judge Dunson's Secret*, we come to know that the world is composed of both truth and sham, and that it can be almost impossible to discern which is which because we all have hidden faces, all have secrets that would appear terrible if they were whispered abroad. We find out that the work of the woman's movement could not have been completed by above-board maneuvers alone; our heroine Zuleika must become someone else and deceive Judge David Dunson to achieve her ends. In this tale of woman's underhandedness matched by man's perfidy, Duniway eloquently illuminates

the lesser-known side of the battle for equal rights.

-- Debra Shein, Ph.D.

-- John Granholm