

The Pathmaker/Frémont/John Frémont: the Pathfinder by Tom Smith

Characters/Audience: *The Pathmaker* (general audiences): 2 men, 1 woman (if doubled)
 Frémont (high school/middle school): 1 man, 1 woman (if doubled)
 John Frémont: the Pathfinder (elementary school): 1 man

Time/Place: 1829-1890, The United States

Running time: *The Pathmaker* (general audiences): 75 minutes
 Frémont (high school/middle school): 50 minutes
 John Frémont: the Pathfinder (elementary school): 30 minutes

All three versions of the play explore the life of John C. Frémont, famed explorer who discovered major paths west to California. Starting with a group of Senators agreeing that the country must expand westward from St. Louis, early scenes reveal Frémont's sense of not belonging, forging his desire to travel and discover.

Soon Frémont becomes a topographer, mapping out uncharted territory. He meets Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, and falls in love with Benton's daughter, Jessie. Exiled for over a year by Jessie's protective father, Frémont and Jessie continue their relationship via letters, and finally elope. Begrudgingly, Thomas Hart Benton accepts Frémont into his family.

Joined by Kit Carson, Frémont is assigned to map out possible railroad paths west. After a brief excursion, he returns home and Jessie begins to help him write books based on his experiences.

Following a brief second expedition, Frémont and his men are forced to take arms against Native Americans during their third expedition to the west. Frémont, a pacifist, is torn by his desire to discover and his need to protect his men.

After a charge of mutiny and a court martial, Frémont quits the military and continues to trek out on his own. During a famed and fatal fourth expedition, Frémont and his men are trapped in the LaGarita Mountains. Freezing and starving, his men resort to cannibalism to survive.

Soon, personal tragedy strikes again and again: Frémont's son dies; the gold rush nearly bankrupts his family; Frémont's anti-slavery stance loses him an election to the Senate; a fire destroys his home; and his newborn daughter dies. Not knowing what to do, Frémont forges on his fifth and final expedition. It is here that Frémont discovers an easier and more efficient path west.

Wanting to dedicate himself to his family, Frémont decides to run for President and becomes the first Republican nominee. He is defeated by Buchanan, and tries a life outside of the public eye. Soon, the Civil War begins and Abraham Lincoln appoints Frémont to become a Union General. But Lincoln thinks Frémont's anti-slavery stance is too strong, and removes him from his post. Jessie confronts Lincoln, but Lincoln's mind is set.

Having lost his pride, having little income, and too old to continue exploring, Frémont and Jessie settle in to enjoy their remaining days, writing books about Frémont's expeditions. They invest their money in the railroad, but strikes and delays bankrupt them. Frémont dies from bronchitis shortly afterwards.

At his funeral, Frémont's son gives an elegy reminding us that "from the ashes of his campfires have sprung cities."

PROLOGUE

A pre-recorded cacophony. Various voices overlap and merge.

How is such a man possible?

His stories read like fiction!

How could he achieve such a glorious life?

Answering the call to leadership...

Did he really find an entire mountain?

Del Norte; he never could forget what happened in those mountains!

Enduring hardships for the sake of--

Enduring months and months of blinding conditions all for--

Running around and killing all for the sake of--

His men had to resort to cannibalism!

His poor wife was always left alone to fend for herself!

The children, without a father around!

Illegitimate, he lived his life in the shadow of being--

Someone had to do it. Why not him?

The poetry of his writing, the artistry...

He went out and claimed California!

He got us a transcontinental railroad!

He founded the West, the entire West!

He was the greatest explorer of the nineteenth century--

--maybe ever--

--and he did it all for the sake of--

--the sake of..

--the sake of...

--all for the sake of--

Realizing the full potential of the continent!

Capitalism!

Business!

3/SENATE

The chair recognizes Senator Linn.

1/LINN

Business is what it's all about, gentlemen. We need bigger business. More industry means more power. The only way we're gonna hold our own in the world is to show everyone else what a prosperous and thriving nation we have. But we can't do that if we don't find and use the riches of the land. We need to send out parties of men, expeditions if you will, to scout what precious commodities are out there. Then we can build businesses to manufacture and sell those commodities and bring our country to economic fruition. For the sake of business, expand!

More recorded voices.

Enduring hardships for the sake of--

Enduring months and months of blinding conditions all for--

Running around and killing all for the sake of--

Business

Realizing the full potential of the continent

Capitalism

3/SENATE

Senator Crittenden, from Kentucky.

2/CRITTENDEN

Capitalism, gentlemen, is why we founded this country in the first place! Our fathers left England to forge a new destiny, free of monarchy. I believe that the true riches of this land lie somewhere among the savages that roam west of the Mississippi. Expansionism for the sake of Capitalism: that is what will drive us to become a force in the world! Fertile farmland, wild game and ample forests wait for us to tame them and make them our own. Why have we stopped at St. Louis? For the good of the nation, we must discover that vast unknown, use its resources, and raise our economy! We owe it to the world to show that Capitalism equals prosperity! Expand for Capitalism!

More recorded voices.

Enduring hardships for the sake of--

Enduring months and months of blinding conditions all for--

Running around and killing all for the sake of--

Capitalism

Business

Realizing the full potential of the continent

1/SENATE

We recognize the Senator from Missouri--Senator Benton.

3/BENTON

Gentlemen, as some of you already know, I am not one for speeches.

Laughter.

But I must tell you that it is imperative that we realize the full potential of this continent. We owe it to our children to provide a better life. The land is there for our taking, gentlemen, and take it we must. It is our manifest destiny. It will not be easy. Lives will be lost trying to claim it. A few men, hunters or explorers or whoever, will be sacrificed to explore this continent and make it our own, but so be it. We must put forth a united front to support the expansion of our nation, and reward those brave few who help us claim what is rightfully ours. The future of our great nation is in our hands! To expansionism!

2/CRITTENDEN

Expansionism!

1/LINN

To new land!

3/BENTON

And the poor bastards who have to get it for us!

SCENE 1

1

Frémont.

2

Frémont.

3

John Charles Frémont. Originally Frémon but sometime later added the "t". Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1813.

2

His father, a French émigré, taught French to the wealthy elite of Norfolk, Virginia. It was there that he met Anne Beverly Pryor, known socially as Mrs. John Pryor.

1

John Pryor was a man of character who had made himself known throughout the state of Virginia as Commissary-General of Military Stores during the last years of the American Revolution. He had the largest livery stable in the state.

3

But he did not have the affections of his young wife.

1

1811.

* * *

A small, secluded grove of trees.

2/ANNE

I fear we have been grossly indiscreet. If anyone were to say anything to my husband...

1/FRÉMONT'S FATHER

Then we would confront him with the truth! Anne, you have no feelings for that old man. I can show you love far greater than any you have ever known. Only, you must trust me. We have to keep this affair secret a while longer. Soon, I'll have enough money and then we can run away from here and--

3/JOHN PRYOR

The whispers from the neighbors that haunted my ears were true! Jezebel! The shame you have caused me, the humiliation!

2/ANNE

My only fault was to not tell you sooner. I don't love you, John. I don't know if I ever did.

3/JOHN PRYOR

Was it your purpose to make me a laughing stock, a fool?

2/ANNE

I never meant to hurt you.

3/JOHN PRYOR

But you did! You did! Jezebel!

He starts to approach her.

2/ANNE

If you are thinking of hurting me, you may spare yourself the crime. I shall leave your house this evening.

Pryor rushes towards her. Frémont's Father pushes him down. Anne and Frémont's Father begin to exit.

It is passion, John, which pioneers our lives. I must follow my heart.

3

And with that they ran away. However, her divorce from John Pryor was never legally finalized.

2

They continued to run. To Savannah, where John Charles was born.

3

Illegitimate.

1

To Nashville, where a daughter was born.

3

Illegitimate.

2

To Norfolk, Virginia. The news of John Pryor's death meant they could be married at last.

3

1818. Another son is born.

1

Yet death claims the young wife's new husband. And shortly after, her small daughter.

3

Anne packed her grief and her two small boys back to Charleston. A widow: penniless and destitute.

2/ANNE

What kind of life can I give my boys?

SCENE 2

3

Young Adulthood. 1829.

A meadow. Frank studying, Frémont daydreaming.

3/FRANK

I get forty-four for number seven. What do you get? Charles?

1/FRÉMONT

I'm sorry, what?

3/FRANK

What's going on? You seem distracted again.

1/FRÉMONT

It's nothing. Really it's not.

3/FRANK

So, what did you get for number seven?

1/FRÉMONT

Boston.

3/FRANK

What?

1/FRÉMONT

Boston.

3/FRANK

Grabbing Frémont's book.

What are you--Geography! Charles, we agreed I'd help you with your Mathematics today. You persuaded me to come all the way to this meadow to study and then you don't even bring the right textbook! I should just let you fail out of college! You don't take it seriously at all.

1/FRÉMONT

Of course I take it seriously! Quit talking to me like you're the Dean.

3/FRANK

Just forget it. I can't be your tutor. I can't stand people like you!

1/FRÉMONT

What are you getting so mad about?

3/FRANK

Look, Charles, college is very important to me. I've worked all my life to be able to afford the tuition. My entire town had bake sales and bazaars to help send me here. I can't afford to louse up this opportunity. You, on the other hand, had some rich lawyer foot your bill--

1/FRÉMONT

--as a gesture of kindness after working my finger to the bone for him for years--

3/FRANK

--you start school as a junior--

1/FRÉMONT

--I made good grades and the Dean knew my friend--

3/FRANK

--and you have the audacity to waste my time when I am trying to do you a favor! You're a dreamer, Charles Frémont! You write stories in that journal of yours and stare out the window during class and you have no discipline at all. They're going to kick you out of this place one day, and when they do I want you to remember that the world doesn't take too kindly to dreamers. This country was not founded by poets and artists. It was founded by explorers and politicians; they had a kind of discipline you will never have. I'm going back to the dormitory.

Frank exits.

1/FRÉMONT

Frank! What the devil was all that about?

2/BECKY

Charles? Charles, is that you?

1/FRÉMONT

Becky?

2/BECKY

Your friends all told me I could probably find you out here. I almost got lost, but then I saw a boy just now storming away with a peculiar look on his face.

1/FRÉMONT

That was Frank, my tutor. He always looks that way. It comes from taking everything too seriously.

2/BECKY

I hope you don't think it's presumptuous of me to come. But when I got your note the other day... You said you had something for me?

1/FRÉMONT

A poem, actually. I'd like to read it to you, if I could.

2/BECKY

Charles, you're blushing!

1/FRÉMONT

I'm very nervous. I've never recited before.

2/BECKY

It's easy. You've already written the poem. Now you just have to say the words out loud.

1/FRÉMONT

Maybe I should just give it to you.

2/BECKY

No, Charles, I want to hear you speak the words. Please, Charles, for me.

1/FRÉMONT

All right then. Promise me you won't laugh.

2/BECKY

I promise.

1/FRÉMONT

I see a woman, wrapped in white-- This is embarrassing.

2/BECKY

Please...

1/FRÉMONT

I see a woman, wrapped in white
Her robes flow to the sky, cocooning her heart
I see her and try to speak
But my words float into the air like petals in late Spring

I hold out my hand
And her porcelain palm touches mine
And all that was unknown and misunderstood
Now becomes as clear as a handful of sun

I look into her eyes
She smiles for a moment
The breeze whispers gently
And I know I have discovered all her secrets

It was a journey I have never taken before
Or ever wish to take again
The first journey into love
Mapped in my sweet lady's eyes

Well?

Becky cannot speak. She holds out her hand.

* * *

Room of the Regents, Charleston College.

2/HEAD OF REGENTS

John Charles Frémont. It has come to the attention of the Board of Charleston College that you have blatantly neglected your duties to this school. You have kept up your grades, but your attendance record is appalling. You have been given warnings, which you choose to ignore. A boy with talent and intelligence is an asset; a boy who squanders the opportunities those brains and talent afford him is a liability. Charleston College cannot afford such a liability. The reason for your absences is even more

appalling: a girl, one I presume, for which you have a fancy. Since that is the case, the Board suspends you from this institution indefinitely. It is our hope that this young girl was worth your time. Good day.

* * *

Main street.

1/FRÉMONT

Becky, I came to your house last night but your father said you didn't want to see me.

2/BECKY

Charles, I can't speak with you now. My father will be coming soon.

1/FRÉMONT

Didn't you get my note? I got kicked out of school. I'm free now, I have no ties that bind me! I want to see the world, and I want you to come with me. I love you, Becky!

2/BECKY

Charles, don't say that!

1/FRÉMONT

I love you and I want us to be together forever.

2/BECKY

Don't, Charles, don't. I can't run off with you.

1/FRÉMONT

Why not? Is it your father? I'll talk to--

2/BECKY

I...I don't love you, Charles.

1/FRÉMONT

What do you mean you don't love me?

2/BECKY

I love your poetry. I love the way you see things in a beautiful way. But I don't love you.

1/FRÉMONT

I don't understand.

2/BECKY

Charles, I want a good life, with a home and children and a husband who has a good job, at a bank or a law firm. I can't marry a man who has no direction in his life. Your freedom makes you happy. But traveling from one city to another, exploring the world: to me, it would be like being lost. I hope you understand, Charles. I have to go now.

1/FRÉMONT

Becky, wait!

2/BECKY

Find a girl with a pioneering and free spirit, Charles. She will be your true love.

She exits.

1/FRÉMONT

But she will never be my first love.

* * *

Frémont's room. Frémont reading his journal.

1/FRÉMONT

I see my life
It is before me, like a long road
But I cannot see where the road dips, or curves, or ends

I try to see how long the road is
But it continues past the horizon
I try to see if the road narrows
But it blends into its surroundings

So I start to walk
Down the road which has no end
And I try to pay attention to what's ahead

And it's only when I reach the horizon that I realize
My life was what was on the side of the road
The grass and the trees and the streams and the life

I have walked all the way to the end of the road
And missed the journey

SCENE 3

A verandah on the estate of Joel Roberts Poinsett.

3/POINSETT

Sometimes a boy needs a break in life. He makes a mistake, and he needs some guidance. Since you don't have a father, it's important I give you that guidance. And a break or two.

1/FRÉMONT

Mr. Poinsett, how can I ever thank you? You have done so much for me.

3/POINSETT

Charles, I see great potential in you. I also see a boy who has acknowledged his mistakes. When we first met, I told you I was having President Monroe over for breakfast and not only did you recognize who he was and what he stood for, but you were able to hold your own in conversation with him. That impressed me a great deal. A lot of boys your age wouldn't have been able to do that, college degree or no college degree. That's also one of the reasons I suggested you to teach for the Naval Academy. I knew seeing another part of the world would open your eyes.

1/FRÉMONT

And it did. It's funny: when we met, I was barely out of school, and you were Joel Roberts Poinsett: world traveler, Presidential breakfast giver, leader in the cause to put together a continental railroad. And now you're Secretary of War under President Van Buren and I'm just a 2nd lieutenant in the Topographical Corps, mapping out small plots of land and swamps. It amazes me you haven't moved past our friendship.

3/POINSETT

I am successful because I always believed I could be. I took advantage of opportunities and I forged a path into uncharted areas. I want you to do the same. That is the greatest gift you could ever give me.

* * *

Frémont writing in his journal.

1/FRÉMONT

Poinsett has opened so many doors for me. Like today, I met Thomas Hart Benton, the Senator from Missouri. I told him I was a topographer. He went on and on about how much he liked the idea of explorers and mapmakers. "The country needs more space," he declaimed, "and you boys are just the ones to get it for us." He's very passionate when he speaks, and it made me feel like I should rush right out and claim the West for America. He's invited me to his house next week.

* * *

1/FRÉMONT

Spent more time with Senator and Mrs. Benton. They are very kind and have taken the time to introduce me to people of influence. I feel like I'm running in the same kind of social circles my mother talks about from her days in Virginia. Everyone is nice, but when they find out I'm only a 2nd lieutenant they don't seem to have much to say to me. The Benton's have invited me back for a party on the 31st.