Melodrama is Alive and Well in Theatres Across the Nation
Visit any modern Melodrama Playhouse today and you can expect to see the typical villain tying the typical damsel to a typical railroad track or maybe foreclosing on her family's ranch with the damsel holding the back of her hand up to her forehead keeping her tears in check as the black caped villain twirls his long moustache or strokes his beard in glee. Then when all hope seems lost ... at the last possible moment ... the hero busts in coming to the heroine's rescue. He vanquishes or arrests or battles with the villain. The damsel then embraces the hero and they ride off into the sunset or more likely sing and dance into the sunset. This is actually more of a caricature of what we expect from melodramas and is quite different from what melodramas actually were in the mid to late 1800s. In those by-gone days ... the melodrama still revolved around the fight between good and evil and were seriously written and seriously acted plays performed across the young United States dealing with issues of the day such as temperance (i.e., the evils of alcohol).

Modern melodramas are more about having fun, booing and hissing the villain, frequent asides by the characters to the audience, and overacting. Audiences love to hate the villain, cheer the hero, and watch good triumph over evil. It is great family entertainment and the essence of bringing community to theatre in its purest form.

Welcome to Melodrama 101
Some of the characteristics of authentic melodrama include:
- That villainy is always distinct from honesty;
- virtue always overcomes vice, and there is a happy ending.
- There is always a hero wearing a white hat, always a villain and his black hat and always a heroine.
- Melodramas are typically fast moving and emphasize the agony that the hero or heroine goes through before good can triumph over evil.
- Other stereotypical characters include a sheriff, the ‘fallen’ woman, and comical friends who face almost insurmountable odds shared with the hero or the heroine.

"Over The Top" Acting
Melodramas are characterized by acting which incorporates large gestures and lavish facial expressions which denote specific characteristics and emotions. Sometimes almost slap-stick comedy in nature. In the Old West ... this acting style was necessary so that the people sitting way up the back of theatres could understand the action ... today we still keep acting that way just because it's more fun that way! Melodramas are usually in the late 1800s and include improvisational pokes and jabs (all in jest) at the local community. Whether you're the mayor or just a proprietor of a local saloon no one is exempted from involvement. And if you heckle the actors ... be prepared for a scathing rebuttal.

Melodies Make The Melodrama
The "melo" in melo-dramas comes from the melody used to highlight and underscore the productions. From "honky-tonk" or "rag time" pianos to authentic cowboy guitar music, just about any live music on stage will do to help you stay true to old western style melodrama. We also recommend that you have a sound effects "Wizard" or "Lackey" to provide live sound effects for each rip-roaring performance. On the Friends of Melodrama Resources page you will find several sources for special effects that will clank ... creek ... and squeak their way into the hearts of your cast and your audiences.

The virtuous hero or vivacious heroine is hounded by a villain and then rescued from a series of life threatening events over and over as our episodic story unfolds. Plot devices like disguise, abduction, concealed identity and fortunate coincidence are often used just to keep the audience guessing what will come next. Characters such as friends of the hero or heroine provide comic relief and, of course, help out with the singing and dancing. Melodramas are perfect for ad-libs and keep the productions fresh each and every night.

Each scene typically ends with a climax and often the villain looks like he will succeed in his nefarious plot. Look for plenty of fist fights and shoot 'em-ups in these thrilling tales of passion and greed and goodness and villainy. The audience will boo the villain and cheer the hero and are even encouraged to grab a foam "rock" or two (or popcorn or what have you) that have been scattered around the audience and hurl, toss or lob them at the villain as he displays his larceny on stage. You might want
to remind your audiences to "Please avoid lobbing the foam "rocks" at your beautiful heroine or your stalwart hero and only throw the foam "rocks" that you provide" as real rocks or plastic fruit tossed on stage tend to keep actors from returning for their next performance. There was performance where someone in the audience actually brought in plastic fruit and a manikin's leg to throw on stage ... but we did manage to "intercept" the intruder well before the plastic appendage was tossed but not before some plastic pears became projectiles. If you are wondering ... yes ... plastic fruit does sting a bit.

**Components of a Successful Melodrama**

Many of the elements that make up modern melodramas come from ancient theatre traditions. For example ... Audience's vocalization, for example, is a long-held custom each year in the re-enactment of the story of Esther. The audience is encouraged to boo and hiss and shake noisemakers when the evil villain Haman's name is even mentioned and cheering always accompanies the mention of either of the heroes Esther and Mordecai. Although some of the elements of American Melodrama have roots in old world theatre ... as a genre old west style Melodrama is unique and is considered a true American art form.

Here are a few suggestions to make your melodrama even more successful whether you write your own, purchase one from HeroandVillain.com or from one of the many prolific producers of modern melodramas that you will find referenced on our Melodrama Scripts page or in our Resources page.

- Bring in your villain (or villains) early ... so the audience can participate.
- Foam "rocks" or "bricks" can be used to throw at the villain instead of popcorn.
- Two act melodramas are the norm and work well even for melodrama dinner theatres.
- Each act needs roughly 45 minutes of script (about 90 minutes in total) worth of dialogue & singing.
- It is very common to include some musical interlude (called an "olio") during intermission.
- The bigger the cast ... the larger your audiences. Families love to attend and cheer or boo relatives.
Some playhouses double-cast roles and add many extras to increase community involvement.

Corny jokes can only go so far ... a well written clever script is the foundation of a good production.

Don't underestimate the intelligence of your audiences. Use quality props and authentic wardrobe.

Just as with any play ... consider a one room multi-part set to avoid scene changes.

Keep things simple and allow the actors to have fun with ad-libs making it a new play every night!

It often comes down to which hat you wear!

**Melodrama is Essentially a Theatre of Emotions**

A gesture here, an inflection there. “Over the Top” facial and physical expressions that you might typify as sensational, sentimental or thrilling is what audiences expect to see at an old west style melodrama. The acting style brings an exuberance of emotions rather than the more realistic motivations we normally experience in life. And it's fun.

In Melodrama every character, every action, every predicament needs to stay true to their character. The good guys are really good and the villain is really bad ... that’s just how it is. Happy endings are the rule and the villain always gets what he deserves in the end. Conflict, misadventure and desperation are resolved at the very last moment, unexpected revelations, unexpected twists or turns are all ingredients of the successful melodrama.

On stage ... the results of small actions taken are not necessarily recognized, but the consequences are foreshadowed to increase the tension inherent in the play. It is not telegraphed, but set up so that there is some sense of expectation of what might occur. The decisions that characters ‘might take’ and ‘might not’ take are presented as possible alternatives and the audience can envision.

As a result, when things do not go as might be expected, the audience is moved into a state of wondering of what might happen next. The actors knowing what is actually going to happen can help push the limits of audience frustration and take
Helpful Hints for Exaggerated Emotions
Since the plot lines in melodramas are pretty much "black and white" ... Villain versus Hero ... Evil versus Good, the emotions are also very easy to determine and extreme.

Anger – The actor’s hands are both shoulder high ... eyebrows are pushed toward each other ... with the actor’s face tense with a grimace ... hands in tight fists.

Fear – The actor’s face is turned to the right side... eyes wide ... with the right hand to the mouth, fingers curled under touching the top of the palm. Optionally both hands can come to the cheeks with the fingers extended.

Grief or Sorrow – The actor's shoulders rounded ... head down and hands cupping the face. Shoulders rise up and down ... with an optional sobbing noise.

Love (Male) – The actor’s chest is held high with his right hand crossing the chest and resting upper left over the heart - opening out to the right and his loved one.

Love (Female) – The actor’s chest is held high with her head cocked a bit to one side the opposite leg goes out with foot pointed ... hands under the chin ... fingers entwined and bent at the first and second knuckles (almost praying), hands then go out towards her beloved with a broad beaming smile on her face.

Villainous Scheming – One eyebrow up, the other down, a grimace on the face and hands rubbing together, if it is a really good plan, the fingers twiddle.

Villainous Sneaking – Shoulders hunched over, one arm raised to cover the nose on down, eyes free to shift around the room, legs bent on the cross of the stage. If you have one ... twirl your black cape or duster as you enter the scene.
**Feeling Overwhelmed** – Chin up bringing the face to look up, one arm dropped limp to the side, the other hand open with palm towards the audience on the top of the forehead.

Below is a site with helpful downloads for your use.  
[http://www.heroandvillain.com/FreeDownloads.html](http://www.heroandvillain.com/FreeDownloads.html)

Video  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G8f4YvFYpM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G8f4YvFYpM)
Modern Melodrama

"A good melodrama is a more difficult thing to write than all this clever-clever comedy: one must go straight to the core of humanity to get it...." - G.B. Shaw

"For me, melodrama is theater that is larger than life-in emotion, in subject, and in complication of plot." - Stephen Sondheim

Traditionally, melodrama includes:
- A strong plot, with high, intense, emotional stakes
- Characters that are identifiable types
- A moral tale, where virtue triumphs and/or evil is punished
- Sensational incidents and effects

In nineteenth-century melodrama, morality was rigidly defined, and the course of the action confirmed that the moral order would prevail, in spite of the chaos of the world. People were punished and rewarded as they deserved, and characters were instantly recognizable to the audience as types—heroes, ingénues, villains. There was very little "subtext" in characters' speeches. Instead, characters declaimed—either in dialogue or in soliloquies—exactly who they were and what they were feeling. Internal emotional journeys were all expressed on stage somehow, either verbally or through visual effects.

Melodramas also often incorporated music, gesture and tableaux in creating a multi-media spectacle. All physical actions, many of which were part of a complex codified system of gestures, had emotional connotations.

While not all of these characteristics are present in all melodrama, the basic central conceits of sweeping emotions, muscular plots and an emphasis on the visual have survived and even thrived in playwriting, both before and since melodrama's Victorian heyday. European masters of the genre include writers such as Pixerecourt and Kotzbue, with Dion Bouicault capturing audiences in England and the US. Various adaptations of Uncle Tom's Cabin, perhaps the most famous melodrama for all time, became (and remain) the most performed plays in American history. Writers whose work has been considered melodrama, and can be analyzed usefully as melodramas, include Eugene O’Neill (Desire Under the Elms, Mourning Becomes Electra), Stephen Sondheim (Sweeney Todd), William Shakespeare (King Lear, among others), and Charles Ludlam (The Mystery of Irma Vep).