

## FIRST DRAFT

## Dalton Trumbo

'Eclipse' was part of GJ author's success in a banner year

When Dalton Trumbo's novel, "Eclipse" was published in 1935, the 29-year-old author from Grand Junction was at the beginning of a breakout year.

He had recently left his tedious, nine-year-long job at a Los Angeles bakery, had briefly been editor of a Hollywood magazine and had been hired as a screenwriter at Warner Brothers Motion Picture Studios.

His first credited screenwriting occurred with a film released later in 1935. His second novel was accepted for publication that year, and he became a frequent contributor to national magazines.

It was a far cry from Trumbo's days as a cub reporter at The Daily Sentinel in Grand Junction. Born in Montrose in 1905, Trumbo spent most of his youth in Grand Junction, graduated from high school here and undertook his first writing in this city.

The events of 1935 also marked a significant change from his long struggle to become a successful writer. As he told one reporter, "Eclipse" was not his first novel, but it was his first published one.

"He wrote six novels, which all the publishers declined, politely but firmly," the Los Angeles Examiner reported in December of 1934, just a month before "Eclipse" was released. Finally, "Eclipse" was accepted for publication. But "Trumbo had rewritten it five times before he let the publisher see it."

"Eclipse" focuses on John Abbott, a store owner in the fictitious Colorado town of Shale City, which was modeled on Grand Junction. Abbott's character was based on William Moyer, the owner of the Fair Store, the most prominent department store in the city.

"Eclipse: The Musical" will be presented at the Avalon Theatre in two shows Saturday, Nov. 4. It is a benefit for the Avalon Theatre Foundation and the Mesa County Historical Society, of which I am a member.

The novel "Eclipse" was published in London, but it wasn't a great success, garnering only limited interest nationally.

In Grand Junction, The Daily Sentinel initially congratulated Trumbo

on his success, not only in getting "Eclipse" published, but on the fact that he had articles published in The Saturday Evening Post, Vanity Fair and other national magazines.

Later on, however, residents of Trumbo's home town became angry at the way Shale City (Grand Junction) and its inhabitants were depicted in the novel.

Elberta Francis, a long-time Grand Junction resident whose brother was the same age as Trumbo, told an oral-history interviewer in 1982 that Trumbo "treated Mr. Moyer rather unkindly." That was especially true, she said, since Moyer helped pay for Trumbo's first year of college at the University of Colorado.

Walter Walker, then publisher of The Daily Sentinel, apparently shared Francis' concerns. "Mr. Walker told Trumbo that his biggest disappointment was that Trumbo had released the book before the death of William Moyer, on whom the major portion of the book was based," wrote the late-Daily Sentinel history columnist Kathy Jordan.

In a letter to Trumbo, Walker also said despite Trumbo's contention that the characters in the book were not based on real people, locals would think they could match up the "fictional" character with locals.

It wasn't just Moyer. Trumbo treated other residents terribly in the book, including one society matron who was pictured as an overweight busy-body, locals said.

"For this book, Trumbo was seen as a villain by many in Grand Junction," according to a Mesa County Library biography on Trumbo. There were stories that Grand Junction residents had burned copies of "Eclipse" or thrown them in the river.

"Eclipse" is many things, but it is not a kind book," wrote Michelle Nijhuis in SFGATE, an online San Francisco magazine. Her article appeared with the 2006 re-release of "Eclipse," by the Mesa County Library. "In Trumbo's thinly fictionalized version, Grand Junction appears to be a petty place, shot through with conceit and deceit."

But Nijhuis' point was that by 2006, Grand Junction residents had forgiven Trumbo for his unkind portrait, and had embraced him as important early resident of the city.

Trumbo himself believed his acceptance by the town came much earlier. In 1937 he told the Los Angeles Daily News he believed "things have cooled down to the point where it will be safe for him to re-visit his native town."

By then, Trumbo's career was taking flight, and he was often the subject of upbeat articles such as these in the Hollywood press:

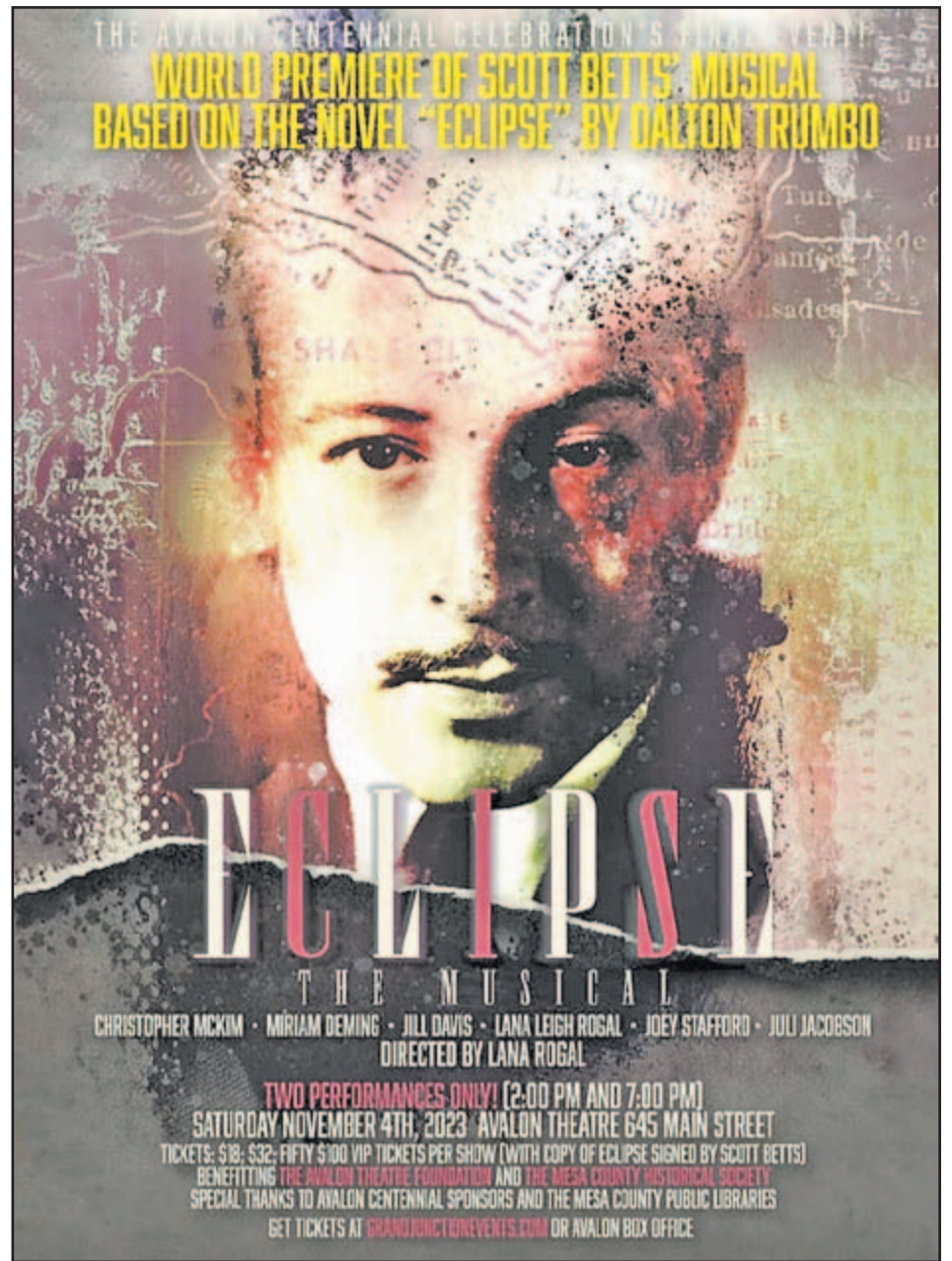
October 1935: "Dalton Trumbo, Warner's writer, owns what is known to be the most complete newspaper file of the World War [World War I] in Hollywood. Collecting press files on important events is the writer's hobby."

February 1936: "Dalton Trumbo, Los Angeles baker boy whose overnight success as a writer makes one of Hollywood's 'miracle tales,' will tell his own story in an interview with Eddie Martin."

March 1936: "Dalton



BOB SILBERNAGEL



COURTESY OF THE AVALON THEATRE FOUNDATION AND MESA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Poster for "Eclipse: The Musical," which will be performed in two shows Saturday, Nov. 4 at the Avalon Theatre.

Trumbo, young novelist and screen writer, frequently writes continuously for 48 hours when he is in a creative mood."

The Los Angeles Daily News profile in 1937 began with the headline, "How to Be a Writer, or, Introducing Mr. Trumbo."

Still, 1935 was a seminal year for Trumbo. By the end of that year, his first screenplay became a film called "Road Gang." In researching the movie, Trumbo reportedly visited 19 state penitentiaries.

His next novel, "Washington Jitters," a political satire, was published on Jan. 1, 1936. Unlike "Eclipse," it generated substantial interest nationally, and was eventually the basis for two Broadway plays.

All that collecting of World War I news stories was likely research for what would come four years later, his acclaimed anti-war novel, "Johnny Got His Gun." The book told the tale of a blind, deaf, armless and legless World War I veteran as he recalled growing up in Shale City. This time, Trumbo's home town received more friendly treatment.

Unlike "Eclipse," "Johnny Got His Gun" was widely reviewed and applauded throughout the country, just as World War II was beginning in Europe. One reviewer in Atlanta called it "the most socially significant work published in many a long, war-scared day."

By 1939, The Daily Sentinel seemed to have forgiven Trumbo for "Eclipse." It congratulated him for the success of "Johnny Got His Gun," and for his screen play for a new film that would star William Holden.

"Johnny Got His Gun" won a National Book Award as the Most Original Novel of 1939. By the late 1940s, Trumbo was well-known in publishing and film-making. Soon he would become embroiled in the controversy over his one-time membership in the Communist Party.

Still, it was 1935, the

year "Eclipse" was published, that marked Trumbo's ascent as a successful author and screenwriter.

Tickets for "Eclipse: The Musical" are available on Avalon Theatre's website: grandjunctionevents.com; and at the Avalon box office. Prices are \$18, \$32 and \$100. The latter includes premium seating, a copy of "Eclipse" signed by Scott Betts, author of the musical, and more.

Sources: Introduction to the 2006 reprint of "Eclipse;" Historic newspaper articles at www.newspapers.com; "Trumbo: Favorite Son or Pariah," by Kathy Jordan at www.historic7th-street.org; "The Hometown that Forgave Dalton Trumbo," by Michelle Nijhuis, at www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/The-hometown-that-forgave-Dalton-Trumbo-2522129.php; "Dalton Trumbo: A conversation between Elberta (Soule) Francis and David Sundal," Mesa County Libraries oral histories.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Dalton Trumbo, appearing before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. He was accused of being a Communist sympathizer and was later black-listed in Hollywood.



Dalton Trumbo, novelist, and bride-to-be, Cleo Fincher. SOURCE NEWSPAPERS.COM

This photo appeared in a Los Angeles newspaper in 1938, shortly before Dalton Trumbo married Cleo Fincher.

OFF THE CLOCK

No work and all play

EVERY WEDNESDAY IN THE DAILY SENTINEL