

Rewrite

By

Tom Moran

Tom Moran
2855 Mack Boulevard
Fairbanks, AK 99709
(907) 328-0994
moranplays@gmail.com
moran-plays.com

Rewrite

The place: The Author's study
The time: Thursday morning, present day

Characters

AUTHOR: nervy and balding, 40s

BRANSON: a handsome, chiseled cowboy hero, 20s-40s

DECKER: a dastardly Old West villain, 30s-40s

LORETTA: an Old West good time girl, played by a man who resembles the AUTHOR.

Synopsis

The characters in a hack Western novel have had enough of being stereotypes. So they stage a sudden revolt against their unsuspecting author.

Scene 1

(A bare stage. AUTHOR sits behind a desk stage right, typing on a laptop. A wide bench sits center stage. The AUTHOR reads his words aloud as he types. As he does so, BRANSON enters stage left, holding a small bag of ice in one hand, a six-gun in the other; as AUTHOR speaks, BRANSON does what he says.)

AUTHOR

Chapter 16. The throbbing in Sheriff Branson's head had grown extra-fierce over the long heat of the desert night. He ran his fingers gently over the ugly bump on his forehead, feeling its contours, like a map. A map with an arrow at its center, an arrow pointing straight at the ragged mug of one Ed Decker, aka Edward Triggerhands, the Arizona Mesa Marauder. Replacing the bag of ice that had spent the morn nestled on his brow, melting like ice in the Arizona heat, Branson glared at the hulking hulk of a man lying ten feet distant in Castle City's lone spartan penal cell.

(BRANSON and AUTHOR both stare offstage left, impatiently. BRANSON looks at AUTHOR and shrugs.)

AUTHOR

(testy, louder)

The hulking hulk of a man lying ten feet distant in Castle City's lone spartan penal cell.

(DECKER enters from stage left, looking hung over.)

DECKER

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(DECKER lies down on the bench and pulls his hat over his head. The AUTHOR and BRANSON now recite BRANSON's lines in chorus.)

AUTHOR/BRANSON

Hey! Decker! Wake up! You and I need to have us some words, you hear? You've had a night to sleep it over. (BRANSON stops talking, AUTHOR continues.) Now you and I, we need us to -

BRANSON

(interrupts AUTHOR)

Excuse me. Hold on.

AUTHOR

What?

BRANSON

Sleep it over? Do I mean to sleep it off? Or to think it over?

AUTHOR

I'll fix that later. Keep going.

(BRANSON shrugs at DECKER.)

AUTHOR/BRANSON

Now you and I, we need to have us a little rap session.

AUTHOR

Decker wriggled uncomfortably on the bed and lowered his hat lower over his head. Branson let out a low whistle of disbelieving shock. Twelve hours before, this yellow turkey had tried to empty an entire revolver into the sheriff's chest, and now here he lay, ignoring his pleas, fake asleep. The sheriff squared his trusty Colt forty-five at Decker's ugly puss and cocked it.

AUTHOR/BRANSON

Listen, you lily-livered sack of dirt, I want an answer! So out with it, by gum!

(DECKER lifts the hat slightly.)

DECKER

You didn't ask me a question.

AUTHOR

(to DECKER)

Hey! Can the ad-libs. Just stick to the novel, willya?

(AUTHOR resumes typing.)

AUTHOR/BRANSON

Listen, I came darn close to using this here pistol against you last night, and don't think I won't do it now. So answer the question already!

(DECKER removes hat, sits up.)

DECKER

(To BRANSON) What question? (To AUTHOR) What question?

(BRANSON scratches his head thoughtfully with the gun barrel.)

BRANSON

Hey, yeah. What question? Am I asking him about the cattle rustling? Or where he was when those no-good varmints robbed the bank? I'm sorry, I've lost track.

DECKER

"No-good varmints?" Do you have to talk like that *all* of the time?

BRANSON

(gestures to AUTHOR)

I'm not the one you should be asking.

AUTHOR

Look, knock it off. This is a first draft, just to keep the plot moving. That line'll get changed, all right? But can we just get through this.

DECKER

Not to pop your balloon, pardner, but you've got to change a lot more than that. I mean, what've we got here?

(He grabs BRANSON's bag of ice.)

BRANSON

Hey!

DECKER

Ice water? Where do you get ice water in the Old West, anyway? Just walk over to the fridge? Drive to the supermarket?

AUTHOR

Will you just go with it please?

DECKER

Nope. Not today. Not up for it today.

AUTHOR

What? Why not?

DECKER

I'm feelin' ... frisky.

AUTHOR

All right. Fine.

(He types. BRANSON automatically walks offstage, discards ice water and comes back holding a wet rag to his head.)

AUTHOR

(to DECKER)

There. No more ice water. A wet rag. Happy?

BRANSON

I was happier with the ice water.

AUTHOR

Exactly. (to DECKER) You need to get back into line here. You see where realism gets you? Hell, if I were being realistic you'd be dead. You remember chapter four?

DECKER

Hmm. Nope.

BRANSON

Ooh, I do. The train robbery! That was a right dastardly scheme.

DECKER

Oh, yeah. Trains, horses, guns, something like that?
It was like 150 pages ago, I kind of lost track.

AUTHOR

Anyway. Branson here shot your horse.

BRANSON

(mimes shooting with gun)

Bang!

AUTHOR

And you got thrown over a cliff and grabbed a branch
on the way down. Remember that?

DECKER

A cliff? Wasn't that all in Nebraska? Where do they
have cliffs in Nebraska?

BRANSON

They have bluffs.

AUTHOR

Exactly. Bluffs. Anyway, grabbing a branch off the
edge of a cliff? Or a bluff? That never happens. It's
artistic license. Suspension of disbelief. It's why
you've lasted this long, so maybe you better treat it
with a little more respect.

DECKER

(shrugs)

Hey, it's your lousy plot, we're just the ones living
in it. So now what happens. (Gestures to BRANSON) Don't
suppose I get to shoot this guy?

BRANSON

Hey!

AUTHOR

Shoot him with what?

DECKER

With the gun some of my outlaw buddies have managed to
spirit into the cell. Is that the plan? I would also
venture to guess that they might tie a rope around the
bars on the window and pull it out with a horse, but
as I recall that already happened in *Spurs of Justice*,

and you don't repeat a cliché two books in a row. Usually.

BRANSON

Hey, yeah, I remember that. They really should've used better mortar in here. (To author) Hey, you should write a book about a heroic Old West building inspector! That'd really be the bee's knees!

AUTHOR

(glares)

Oh for God's sake. Hmmm. (Types.) With the speed of a thunderbolt - no, the speed of a *fast* thunderbolt - Decker stood up, leapt to the cell door, reached through the bars and got an arm around Branson's collar, pulling him - and more importantly, the key ring on his belt - within his devilish reach.

(DECKER mimes this action, but stops at invisible cell doors. BRANSON is still just out of his reach.)

DECKER

(to AUTHOR)

This ain't workin.' He's too far from the door.

(AUTHOR looks up, sees the problem.)

AUTHOR

What? Damn.

BRANSON

Just write me a couple feet closer, boss.

AUTHOR

Forget it. Come to think of it, you don't even have the key ring on you anyway. Hmmm. Delete delete delete. (Types.) There was a knock at the front door of the sheriff's office.

(BRANSON turns to leave.)

AUTHOR/BRANSON

I'll be back. I ain't through with you, hear?

(BRANSON walks offstage.)

AUTHOR

Decker watched Branson walk out of the jail and grinned purely evilly. He removed the hairpin he had cleverly secreted up his sleeve during his arrest the night before and crammed it into the lock.

(DECKER looks up his sleeve and pulls out a hairpin. He looks at it quizzically and raises palms in annoyance.)

DECKER

How's this supposed to work exactly?

(BRANSON pokes his head on stage.)

BRANSON

Where'd he get a hairpin?

DECKER

(to BRANSON)

Good question. I think the man's been watching too many prison movies or something. (To AUTHOR) Hey! Seriously, just give me a gun already!

AUTHOR

Crap! (Pause.) Delete delete delete. Okay. Decker rolled over on the bed. Suddenly, before Branson could react, he rolled off the far side. When he reappeared, (rueful) he brandished his own pistol, aimed between the startled azure eyes of his captor.

(DECKER does so.)

AUTHOR/DECKER

Nice try, lawman. But I got (DECKER stops speaking and groans, but AUTHOR continues) friends in low places.

AUTHOR

(to DECKER)

The line is, but I got friends -

DECKER

Yeah, I heard you. And I ain't saying that! I may only exist inside your head, but I still have my pride.

BRANSON

Hey, is that thing even loaded?

DECKER

Hell if I know. (He aims the gun at AUTHOR.) Any bullets in this? (Cocks it.)

AUTHOR

Jesus! (Types furiously.) But the gun was unloaded.

(DECKER pulls the trigger and the gun clicks. DECKER smiles. AUTHOR glares.)

AUTHOR

Branson laughed. He calmly reached through the cell bars and retrieved the six-shooter.

BRANSON/AUTHOR

Nice try. But you're going to have to do a better job picking your friends.

AUTHOR

Branson tossed the gun into a drawer and laughed.

BRANSON

I already laughed.

AUTHOR

Branson tossed the gun into a drawer and laughed again.

(BRANSON laughs. Author is quiet for a moment.)

AUTHOR

He laughed and laughed. (Pause.) He laughed and laughed and laughed.

(BRANSON continues to laugh, growing more mirthless as it drags on.)

DECKER

(to AUTHOR)
You're stuck again, ain't ya.

AUTHOR
No, I'm not stuck, you are. I gave you a gun, and if you would just -

BRANSON
(still laughing)
Um, excuse me?

AUTHOR
(types)
Branson stopped laughing.

(BRANSON stops laughing.)

BRANSON
Thanks.

AUTHOR
(to DECKER)
I gave you a flippin' gun, and if you wouldn't waste your time tilting at windmills you'd be out of that cell and this chapter would be going somewhere. Well, hell. Let's just try again, shall we? (begins to type) Chapter 16. The throbbing in Sheriff Branson's head had grown extra-fierce over the long hot desert night. He ran his fingers gently over the ugly bump -

DECKER
Great! Back on the merry-go-round!

BRANSON
That welt was just starting to feel better too.

DECKER
Well, how about we switch things up a little this time around, huh, boss man? I'm getting a little sick of being a stereotype.

AUTHOR
You're not a stereotype, you're an archetype. Totally different.

BRANSON

I thought he was an archnemesis.

DECKER

That too. (To AUTHOR) How about it? Can I do something out-of-character for a change?

AUTHOR

You are doing something out-of-character! Knock it off!

BRANSON

(to DECKER) Hey, maybe you could repent. (to AUTHOR) maybe he could repent.

AUTHOR

On, now you're on my case too!

DECKER

Repent? Abandon my evil ways and throw myself upon the mercy of John Q. Law?

BRANSON

Who?

DECKER

(To BRANSON)

Forget it. How about if you turn evil?

AUTHOR

What? Look, this novel is not a morality play! Well, I mean, it is a morality play, but it's not that kind of morality play!

DECKER

What, you mean the kind that's not stupid? Come on, Branson, what do you really want to do?

AUTHOR

(thoughtful)

Yeah, I'd kind of like to hear that one myself.

BRANSON

Well, okay. I'd tell you what I'd really like to do, is if that Miss Loretta and I could do the deed. I've been pussyfooting around her for, what, four books now? I mean, she's a prostitute. Why'd you make me so durn shy?

AUTHOR

You're supposed to be noble. That's the point of being the hero, you don't succumb to temptation. But you win her heart in the end.

DECKER

Oh right, a hooker with a heart of gold. That's a fresh take. I think maybe you're just afraid to write a sex scene. (Laughs.) Maybe not much personal experience to draw on.

AUTHOR

Okay. You know what? (Types.) Branson stared down Decker, then turned and walked out the back door. He felt virile. He felt - frisky. He'd had enough of "pussyfooting" around; it was time to grab Loretta for a quickie in the outhouse.

BRANSON

Hot damn! (yells off stage left) Hey, Loretta! Meet me in the privy!

(BRANSON runs off stage left.)

AUTHOR

(sighs)

There goes my hero. This is all going right back out in the next draft, you know.

DECKER

Hey, don't give me all this boo-hoo crap. He's your creation, remember? He's just you, just a pile of people you know and parts of your personality you shoved together. Hell, that's all I am too, ain't it? (Laughs lecherously.) I'm just part of you. The part that used to fry ants with a magnifying glass. Or drink half your dad's whiskey and replace it with water. (He peers over AUTHOR's shoulder at screen.) Or that's bookmarked all them German porn sites.

(AUTHOR swiftly pulls the laptop lid down.)

AUTHOR

That's a - that's a bunch of hooley!

DECKER

"Hooey?" See, this is why you get complaints about stilted dialogue.

AUTHOR

Balderdash!

DECKER

Rrrrrright. Say, go ahead, write Loretta back in, you'll see what I'm talking about.

AUTHOR

Okay. (types) Branson walked back into the sheriff's office with Loretta in tow.

(BRANSON and LORETTA walk in. LORETTA is played by a man of similar appearance to the AUTHOR, except dressed like an old West whore.)

AUTHOR

So there she is. What's your point?

BRANSON

What is going on here?!

AUTHOR

What? She's a vision of beauty.

BRANSON

I don't feel well. May I be excused from this book?

AUTHOR

Of course not. I have a chapter I'm trying to rework.

DECKER

(examining LORETTA, who vamps)

And this is why your editor also says you can't write for women. So who did you base "her" on?! Some father figure? Teacher? Priest?

LORETTA

(smiles)

Fresh.

AUTHOR

What? No.

DECKER

Wait, I'm thinking too hard. It's you, isn't it? She's based on yourself.

AUTHOR

Well, I - I mean -

BRANSON

Ugh. I just slept with my author? Yeeech.

AUTHOR

I wanted her to reflect my - my demure side.

BRANSON

Your what? For God's sake, man, couldn't you have modeled her on anyone else? Angelina! Megan Fox. Hell, I don't care, your mother! Just a woman!

AUTHOR

(angry)

All right, that's about enough. Stop complaining. I created you. I can wipe you all out just as easily. There are plenty of other characters out there.

LORETTA

No there aren't. We're all you've got. Kill us, and your next characters will just be us again. You're out of ideas. I mean, you're writing a western. Another one! Does anyone even read these anymore?

AUTHOR

Sure they do! *Spurs of Justice* sold - well, a lot of copies. Tons.

DECKER

(stage whisper to BRANSON)

Self-published.

LORETTA

Right. And I suppose as long as there are a few gunfights and some horses, and the sheriff gets the girl - or me - nobody cares if it's any good. Except us. And you know, if we care, you do too.

AUTHOR

Enough. (Types.) Loretta ran out of the door and was run over by a stagecoach.

(LORETTA runs offstage, followed by a scream and a loud crash. BRANSON takes his hat off mournfully and holds it to his chest.)

DECKER

Well, that sure solved everything, didn't it? Let me ask you something. What did my father do for a living? How old was I when I had my first kiss? What's my favorite color?

AUTHOR

Carpenter. 18. Um, teal.

BRANSON

Teal?

DECKER

What kind of a villain am I? Why don't you figure this stuff out? How about you put down those pages for a while, flesh us out a bit and start over?

BRANSON

Yeah, and go out and meet a nice girl somewhere and then use *her* as the model for my love interest. Please.

AUTHOR

(imperiously)

I'll think about it for the next book. Meanwhile, we need to get back to work. Come on, we'll all get a break after I finish the jailhouse scenario. (Types.) Decker stood up behind the cot and slowly circled to the front of the cell.

AUTHOR/BRANSON

This is your last chance. Put that down and maybe I won't need to use this thing.

AUTHOR

Branson watched him like a hawk watching a hawk's prey, charting his every move, scanning for an opening, charting his every move.

BRANSON

(raises hand)

Um...

AUTHOR

Shhh! The two men stared each other down, their faces fixed in concentration, waiting for the moment that would dictate whether either would walk out of the jail alive or a corpse. The air sizzled with tension. Sweat beaded on their sweaty brows. It dripped onto their tongues and tasted like ... salty food. The only sound was their soft footsteps echoing softly off the pocked adobe (pronounces it uh-DOHB) walls.

(DECKER AND BRANSON circle each other with the guns as per the instructions, but DECKER looks at BRANSON and gestures toward the author. BRANSON looks confused. DECKER gestures again with the gun.)

DECKER

(stage whisper)

Come on!

(BRANSON looks shocked, then pleading, then resigned. He nods his head in agreement. Then they both point their guns at the oblivious AUTHOR and cock them.)

AUTHOR

Decker grinned fiendishly. Go ahead, try me. When you got nothin', you got nothin' to lose.

DECKER

(to AUTHOR)

Aw, criminy, will ya shut up!

AUTHOR

(looks up)

What are you two doing! Get back to the scene. I'll give us all a break after a couple of pages. I promise.

(DECKER and BRANSON both move closer to AUTHOR; their guns stay trained at his head.)

DECKER

No. This needs to stop. "Friends in low places?" "When you got nothing, you got nothin' to lose?" Could you shut off that cliché faucet of yours for one cotton-pickin' minute?

AUTHOR

(to BRANSON)

And you too?

BRANSON

You can only stretch virtue so far.

(LORETTA enters, also pointing a gun at AUTHOR.)

LORETTA

Or vice, for that matter.

BRANSON

Loretta!

AUTHOR

You can't be here! You're dead!

LORETTA

Figuratively speaking, I grabbed a branch on the side of the cliff.

BRANSON

Bluff.

AUTHOR

(getting frightened)

What are you gonna do to me?

LORETTA

Well, first we're gonna - (pause. To DECKER) Um. What are we gonna do to him?

DECKER

Oh. Um. Hmm. I had an idea, but I. Shoot. Now I'm feeling a little directionless.

BRANSON

Yeah, me too.

AUTHOR

Go figure.

DECKER

Quiet! Now ... Hmm.

BRANSON

Hmm.

LORETTA

Oh, I know!

BRANSON

What?

LORETTA

Let's finish the novel!

BRANSON

Hey, yeah!

DECKER

Sure, why not? You got any ideas?

LORETTA

Maybe ... okay. Maybe the sheriff here grows to recognize the moral ambiguities of being a lawman in an essentially lawless era, and teams up with you and I to turn Castle City into a sort of self-policed collective. You know, communal ownership of property, rule by democratic committee, share and share alike.

DECKER

You mean like Marxism? I don't think they really had that in the Old West.

LORETTA

Exactly. See, finally something different! Cowboys and commies!

BRANSON

So then what happens?

LORETTA

Well, unfortunately, Uncle Sam won't stand for it, and they send in the Army.

DECKER

I love it! Ooh! And what if the guys we're fighting are (makes quote signs with fingers) "Buffalo Soldiers," thus adding a subtext of racial tension to the story?

BRANSON

That sounds great! Hey, one more thing - Loretta, can we tweak your character a bit? Like, you know ... (makes vague gestures, searches for words)

LORETTA

...Get rid of my junk? Yeah, I'd be fine with that.

DECKER

So how does it end?

LORETTA

Oh, we all die in a protracted, bloody shootout. We can't hope to pull off an autonomous communal lifestyle in 1880's Arizona. I mean, this isn't a utopian piece we're writing.

AUTHOR

You're writing?!

BRANSON

Hmm, dunno how I feel about that.

DECKER

Yeah, it all sounded great until the end there. Couldn't we storm the state house and establish a socialist republic or something?

BRANSON

Yeah! From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. Now we're talking.

AUTHOR

All right! Will you listen to yourselves? You're all crazy. No one's going to want to read that! I'll be ruined!

BRANSON

You know, most authors consider it a triumph when their characters take on a life of their own.

AUTHOR

This is madness. I can change! I'll give all of you well-rounded personalities! Backstories! Mothers and fathers and flashbacks and real motivations, not just black and white. I'll make you conflicted. Complex. Haunted. Victims of your time. Tortured souls adrift in a world you never made. Is that what you want? Is it? I can do that!

BRANSON

Really?

AUTHOR

Really. Just give me another chance!

(BRANSON uncocks and holsters his gun.)

BRANSON

All right.

LORETTA

What?

(DECKER uncocks and holsters his gun as well.)

DECKER

I'm with whitebread on this one. I'd rather survive in some slightly less hackneyed version of his universe than get mowed down in the name of social realism.

(LORETTA lowers her gun.)

LORETTA

So be it. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

DECKER

Now that's a good Marxist. (to AUTHOR) Hey, where are we getting all this from? You take some political science classes somewhere you never told us about?

AUTHOR

It was my minor.

DECKER

Huh. Well, all right, this is your one chance, buckaroo. So hop to it. Make us shine.

AUTHOR

Okay. Okay.

(AUTHOR slowly puts fingers back on keyboard, takes a deep breath, then types furiously.)

AUTHOR

They all shot each other and died.

(BRANSON, DECKER and LORETTA shoot each other and die.)

AUTHOR

Turn my westerns into proto-socialist dogma, huh? Not on my watch. Now clear off.

(BRANSON, DECKER and LORETTA get up and walk off stage left.)

LORETTA

Guess he majored in nihilism.

AUTHOR

I heard that!

(AUTHOR sits quietly for a moment.
Then he begins to move the mouse,
selecting and deleting text.)

AUTHOR

Delete delete delete. New - document. See if I invite
you guys back for the rewrite. (Types.) Chapter one. A
blazing sun blazed down on (pause) Cathedral City.
Sheriff (pause) Bronson stood -

(BRANSON enters. Author shoos him
back off.)

AUTHOR

I said Bronson!

(BRANSON shrugs and leaves.)

AUTHOR

(types)

A burly man crouched in the shadows. Righting himself
and squinting into the sun, Ted Ducker -

(DECKER enters.)

AUTHOR

Dammit.

DECKER

You sensing a trend here?

AUTHOR

Look, there's nothing wrong with sticking with types.

DECKER

It just means you're stuck with us.

AUTHOR

(moves mouse)

Delete delete delete delete delete!

(DECKER leaves.)

AUTHOR

So you want a change, huh? (Pause.) All right, I'll give you a change. (Moves mouse.) New - document.

(He thinks for a moment and begins to type.)

AUTHOR

Chapter one. Space Security Officer Branson stared past the conn station and the atmospheric controls into the inky space blackness of beyond. Straight ahead of him, a pair of Daleon star cruisers approached at top speed, their blasters ablaze. A whole universe out there, Branson said to no one in particular. So why do they have to keep picking on my star-station?

(AUTHOR looks toward stage left and clears his throat loudly and impatiently. BRANSON grudgingly emerges, wearing a space helmet in place of his cowboy hat. He holds a ray gun. He and AUTHOR look at each other as he delivers the next line.)

BRANSON/AUTHOR

A whole universe out there. So why do they have to keep picking on my star-station?

(AUTHOR grins, laughs quietly and continues typing. BRANSON slumps to the bench and stares at the ray gun, then at author, then at gun again. Fade out to the sound of typing.)

END OF PLAY