

Playwright in Paradise

Playwright William Luce has found a home, and inspiration, in Depoe Bay.

STORY BY ALLEN COX

WHEN CELEBRATED PLAYWRIGHT William Luce talks about why he settled in Depoe Bay, his eyes practically tell the story. “When I first arrived, I stood on the cliff looking out at the ocean and I had to pinch myself,” he recalls. “I couldn’t believe a place of such beauty was going to be my home.”

Hanging on the edge of the Pacific on a segment of coastline that boasts rugged cliffs, deep forests, and secluded coves, tiny Depoe Bay is surrounded by raw nature. In proportion to its size, the town is home to what a sign claims is the smallest harbor in the world, a pond-size inlet that protects a fishing fleet and Coast Guard station from Pacific storms. Depoe Bay is dwarfed by its nearest neighbors, Lincoln City and Newport, and its residents—Luce among them—definitely like it that way.



PHOTO BY ROGER WARD

“I was raised in Portland and then moved to Los Angeles,” Luce says. “Of course, that was a natural place to pursue a career in the entertainment industry.” He has since put in plenty of time in New York, London, and other major cities throughout the course of his career. Far from retired, it’s no wonder that, today, Luce finds Depoe Bay ideal for the disciplined daily regimen a writer’s life demands.

WILLIAM LUCE’S DEPOE BAY PICKS

When William Luce suggests how guests can experience the best of Depoe Bay, four favorite activities always come to mind:

Galleries: The art scene showcases the remarkable talents of some of the locals. Silver Heron Gallery exhibits an eclectic array of fine arts, including the unique and highly collectible work of Oregon native Ray Lewis, Luce’s long-time companion who was sculptor, designer, and creator of the acclaimed Fauna Collection. (541-765-2886; www.silverherongallery.com, www.faunacollection.net)



PHOTO BY ALLEN COX

Parks: Within 5 miles in either direction of Depoe Bay, state parks and scenic areas offer unparalleled viewing of marine life as well as the inspiring power of the Pacific. Luce’s picks are Boiler Bay to the north of town and Devil’s Punchbowl to the south. (www.oregon.gov/OPRD/PARKS)

Eco-Tripping: Nature and scenery first drew Luce to Depoe Bay and have kept him here. Now, Luce suggests that visitors who want to experience the area’s natural gifts on water or land contact Northwest Eco-excursions, an outfitter that practices sustainable tourism. Experienced guides lead kayak tours of



PHOTO BY ALLEN COX

Luce's literary passions ignited at a young age thanks to an astute English teacher who recognized his talent and encouraged him to enter a poetry contest—but not just any contest. “This one was sponsored by *The Atlantic Monthly*,” Luce recalls. “Can you imagine what a thrill that was for a high school kid from Portland?” Luce proved his literary prowess when he won and his work was published in the venerable magazine.

At an early age, he developed a love of poetry, especially that of Emily Dickinson. That literary education led him later to pen his breakthrough solo play, *The Belle of Amherst*, about Dickinson, starring actress Julie Harris on Broadway. She won a Tony Award for her performance. The solo genre suited Luce and he went on to write additional plays about literary and theatrical figures—Lillian Hellman, Isak Dinesen, Charlotte Brontë, John Barrymore, Vaslav Nijinsky, and others—as well as film screenplays and opera librettos.

In his memoir *In Spite of Myself*, actor Christopher Plummer, the original star of Luce's play *Barrymore* (in which Plummer is scheduled to reappear in a 2011 Toronto revival), quipped about Luce's choice of Depoe Bay as a place to call home: “Seated in his favorite table in the old Sea Hag, a restaurant in Depoe Bay, Oregon, the author and playwright William Luce had managed to exile himself as obliquely far west as he dared so that he'd become not only reclusive but exclusive. His choice of abode was so remote, so tucked away,



The harbor at Depoe Bay.

PHOTO BY ROGER WARD

that it was out of bounds for homing pigeons. In fact, he might have easily disappeared off the face of the planet had not e-mail been invented.”

Luce laughs over that obvious exaggeration about his chosen home, but, for him, Depoe Bay's “tucked away” location makes it a sanctuary for serious work and serious relaxation. He likes to joke about the fact that the tallest

building in town is two stories and feigns amazement at “metropolises” like neighboring Lincoln City and Newport. But he adds, “Depoe Bay suits me perfectly.” ■



nature-rich backwater estuaries and creeks, with plenty of hands-on instruction for beginners. Landlubbers can enjoy guided nature hikes, equestrian tours, and day trips. (541-765-2598; www.nwecoexcursions.com)

Thar Be Whales! “Gray whales are a huge attraction here,” says Luce, pun intended. The water off Depoe Bay is one of the most active whale-gathering spots along the entire coast. In a single week in the spring of 2009, 65 gray whales were spotted off Depoe Bay. Oregon Parks and Recreation operates the Whale Watching Center in the heart of town, ground zero for learning more about these magnificent animals. (www.whalespoken.org)



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WHEN YOU GO

- Central Oregon Coast Association (800-767-2064; www.coastvisitor.com)
- Depoe Bay Chamber of Commerce (541-765-2889;

www.depoebaychamber.org)

- Gracie's Sea Hag (541-765-2995; www.theseahag.com)
- Tidal Raves Seafood Grill (541-765-2995)
- William Luce (www.williamluce.com)