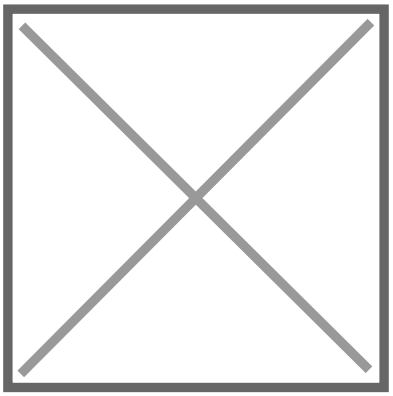

Bringing the Canyon Indoors: Footpath Theatre Company on Three Lives of Western Minerals and Their Origins

Description

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Most theatre companies that land a hit hold on to what worked. Footpath Theatre Company takes it apart. *Western Minerals and Their Origins* has been staged three times in three years, at the Great Salt Lake Fringe in 2024, Salt Lake Acting Company in 2025, and Kingsbury Hall this year, and the company rebuilt it almost from scratch each time. â??Thereâ??s no attachment to it being the last version,â?• says Harrison Lind, a co-founder and the companyâ??s music and sound designer. â??Weâ??re a little too restless,â?• he adds, â??to not reinvent ourselves.â?•

Connor Johnson, the playwright and a co-creator, believes that constant rebuilding is what makes remounting a show worthwhile. Returning to the same script year after year usually yields less each time. â??But because we keep reinventing it,â?• he says, â??that excites our imaginations and lets us sink our teeth in, rather than doing the same thing we did the year before.â?• Still, he admits that tearing down a show audiences have already embraced can be nerve-wracking. â??Once you get a positive response to something,â?• he says, â??it feels a little risky.â?• After three productions, I sat down with Johnson and Lind to look back on all of them.

I first saw Western Minerals on a hot final weekend at Fringe. I hadnâ??t planned to review anything that year, but people in Salt Lakeâ??s theatre community were talking about the show, so I reached out and got a seat. That version included a blindfolded sequence, a psychedelic hunt for a legendary gem called Leopard Beryl, and a descent into the canyon staged with a cloth-draped plank that Johnson and Lind lifted higher as co-founder Jessica Graham climbed across it. Anyone who saw only the later versions would have no idea what Iâ??m describing.

That has become a running joke with the company. A few audience members saw the first and third versions but missed the second, and theyâ??ve come out asking, more or less, what happened? Johnson and Lind say those viewers whoâ??ve seen multiple versions are the ones they most enjoy talking to. â??Hearing what they missed, what they loved, what they noticed, is sometimes the most

helpful thing from our perspective,â?• Lind says. â??Even though itâ??s so simple.â?•

Three young adults engage in a playful rehearsal, using a blanket as a prop in a creative indoor setti
Harrison Lind, Jessica Graham, & Connor Johnson, in rehearsal for the first version of Western Minerals and Their Origins, before its 2024 Great Salt Lake Fringe premiere. (Photo courtesy of Footpath Theatre Company)

A company forged on the road

Footpathâ??s story starts in Brooklyn, where Johnson and Lind were living. Their first project, The Wreck of the Queen Thomasina, was a rhyming-verse play about pirates, performed for a house of about ten people. When they took it to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2023, Graham, then living in Ireland, joined them. In Scotland, she became, as Johnson puts it, the surrogate director, stage manager, tour manager, technician, and cheerleader: â??everything we couldnâ??t do.â?• Graham, now a performer and the lead on much of Footpathâ??s scenic design, was absent from our conversation.

Johnson and Lind both consider the Edinburgh trip Footpathâ??s real beginning; Johnson calls it â??a crucible.â?• Itâ??s where three friends learned they could survive a month of performing together. â??We ended up still liking each other enough to keep working together,â?• Johnson says. â??It was like, oh, maybe we could do this.â?•

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Two actors perform a scene in a dimly lit theater, one on a chair reading while the other observes th
Connor Johnson & Harrison Lind in *The Wreck of the Queen Thomasina*, Footpathâ??s first production, ahead of its 2022 Brooklyn premiere. (Photo courtesy of the University of Utah Department of Theatre)

> **â??We ended up still liking each other enough to keep working together. It was like, oh, maybe we could do this.â?•**
> *â?? Connor Johnson*

All three grew up in Utah and studied theatre at the University of Utah, where Lind graduated in 2020 and Johnson and Graham in 2021. After their time away, each eventually came home. Lind moved back to Salt Lake. Graham returned after working in San Francisco, Colorado, and Ireland as a production manager, outdoor adventure guide, and educator. Johnson spent summers in Salt Lake while earning an MFA in playwriting at the University of Arkansas, which he completed this spring, a few months before the Kingsbury run.

In the summer of 2024, they decided to make a show for the Fringe. They knew only that it would be about southern Utah and about canyoneering. Everything else came during a rushed development period of about three weeks before opening in late July. â??It was really rough and tumble,â?• Lind says.

Rock layers, garage layers

What has survived every version is the geology. At the Fringe, it came through William K. Wagley, a Victorian-era Oxford professor played by Johnson in a British accent. Wagley was loosely inspired by Charles Lyell, the Scottish geologist whose 1840s travels introduced British readers to North American rock. In later versions, Graham took over the explanation, still using the scale model of canyon country she built for that first run. It impressed me then, and it still does.

Johnsonâ??s father is a geologist, and so is Lindâ??s sister. Johnson remembers the first versionâ??s makeshift rehearsals. â??We had a whiteboard, and we were rehearsing in our houses because we didnâ??t have any space,â?• he says. â??My dad would come by when we werenâ??t rehearsing, look at the whiteboard, and cross things out and correct things. So it was all based in very good science.â?•

To Lind, the geology is essential to the playâ??s purpose. â??We want the show to be a complete love letter to southern Utah,â?• he says. â??You can write about how much you enjoy recreating there, but you canâ??t write a love letter to a place like that and not talk about some of the hard science.â?•

The playâ??s most important structural idea came from having room to experiment. Salt Lake Acting Companyâ??s Making Space for Artists program, which lets small companies produce their own work at SLAC, gave Footpath its chapel theatre for a full month. The staff let them work late into the night. â??We could do whatever we wanted, really,â?• Johnson says. â??They were so generous.â?•

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> **â??You canâ??t write a love letter to a place like that and not talk about some of the hard science.â?•**
> *â?? Harrison Lind*

That freedom changed what the show could be. Fringe productions move in and out of shared venues, so they have to work anywhere. At SLAC, Footpath could shape the room itself. The first change was flipping the orientation, placing the audience on the stage and the actors in the tiered, kiva-like seating. Then came the central idea: a garage. A family garage holds layers of accumulated history, and those layers could mirror the strata of a canyon wall. The playâ??s story, about Ari and her brother Rion, carries its own layers of family history too.

â??We could have a marriage of content and form,â?• Johnson says, â??in a way that was really satisfying to us.â?• It also gave them a practical advantage, since the space allowed them to build full arches from stacked boxes. Both creators agree that the third version could not exist without that month. â??If we hadnâ??t had the ability to rehearse and perform in one space last year,â?• Lind says, â??I donâ??t think this yearâ??s version of the show would have happened.â?•

Two actors in a cluttered stage setting interact, surrounded by boxes and theatrical props, evoking a
Connor Johnson as Rion and Jessica Graham as Ari in *Western Minerals and Their Origins*.
(Photo: Anna Chapman)

Scaling up at Kingsbury Hall

The third production brought new challenges. When UtahPresents agreed to produce the show at Kingsbury Hall, in association with Flying Bobcat Theatrical Laboratory, Footpath arranged a workshop

week in the theatre. They knew they wouldnâ??t be able to develop the whole show there. â??Even though they cut off the audience, I looked at how huge and how tall that stage is,â?• Johnson says, â??and I just thought, oh my God, I donâ??t know how weâ??re going to fill this.â?•

The SLAC chapel had been roughly the size of a garage. Kingsbury was not. â??Thereâ??s probably no garage on Earth thatâ??s this tall,â?• Lind says. That height became an advantage. The company had considered including a real rappel from the ceiling, and UtahPresents agreed to make it happen. â??Truly the best team Iâ??ve ever encountered in my life,â?• Johnson says. â??Everything we suggested to them, they were like, yes, we can make that happen. They never said no.â?•

The set grew, and the show did too, running about thirty minutes longer. â??We had to clear a higher bar now,â?• Johnson says. â??And it was hard.â?•

Part of the difficulty was losing control. At SLAC, Footpath had left its setup in place for a month, and the show was lit by a friend, Harvey, an actor with an interest in lighting who did remarkable work with a small budget. At Kingsbury, the technical demands were far greater. While touring the space, the company met James, a longtime UtahPresents lighting technician, who asked whether they needed a lighting designer. â??We were like, yes,â?• Johnson says.

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â??The bigger a show gets, the more people you need,â?• Johnson continues. â??Itâ??s kind of obvious, but it was a learning experience for us to relinquish some control. When youâ??re doing it with friends, you have a say in everything. The bigger it gets, the less power you have over the whole.â?•

> **â??Thereâ??s probably no garage on Earth thatâ??s this tall.â?•**
> *â?? Harrison Lind*

Lind sees that loss of control as a result of success. â??People are invested in us and our process now,â?• he says. â??That means more people are going to come in. And itâ??s hard to relinquish some of that. Thereâ??s someone on staff whoâ??s done this for years, and itâ??s like, all right, we can let this go.â?•

The trust went both ways. â??We were also inviting these people to trust us,â?• Lind says. â??We have our own funny way of working, a process weâ??re pretty confident in.â?• That process is unusually flat. Johnson writes most of the script, about ninety percent, but the roles in the room are fluid; director Alexandra Harbold, who staged both the SLAC and Kingsbury productions, is credited alongside the three founders as a co-creator. â??Thereâ??s an exchange of ideas,â?• Johnson says. â??If we feel strongly about something someone else is heading, weâ??re free to voice it. Thatâ??s pretty unique, because most of the time thereâ??s a clear hierarchy.â?•

Johnson says the reward is seeing collaborators realize they have real influence. â??The goal is that the best idea is the one we go with, no matter who it comes from,â?• he says. â??Itâ??s fun to see people lean in and recognize, oh, I have an impact on this show. The way they take ownership is really exciting.â?•

Two actors engage in an intense conversation inside a tent, illuminated by a lantern and flashlight, c

Jessica Graham & Connor Johnson as Ari & Rion in Western Minerals and Their Origins. (Photo: Anna Chapman)

From heartbreak to momentum

The biggest change between the second and third productions was the ending. According to Johnson, the first version lacked emotional stakes the team was satisfied with. The second fixed that, maybe too well. It ended in grief, focused more on the siblings than on the land. The Kingsbury version turned outward, and I felt it carried a clearer political message about the land itself.

During rehearsals, news came of another move to shrink Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Johnson says Lind came into rehearsal that day distraught. For Lind, the loss was personal. The showâ??s emotional and geographic center, for him, is Coyote Gulch, a canyon in the Escalante country he once visited every year. â??The thought that this place could be taken away from everyone, at the whim of someone,â?• he says, â??that these precious Native lands and recreational lands could be destroyed, was a little overwhelming.â?• â??I didnâ??t want the show to become about this,â?• he adds. â??But I think we would have been remiss not to let it be part of what weâ??re thinking about.â?•

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The Greek rhetoricians called this kairos: the right moment. Footpathâ??s creators have mixed feelings about how timely their play became. â??These places are literally constantly under threat,â?• Johnson says. â??But for it to be right when that announcement came was a weird feeling. This is terrible, and also it makes the play feel more important to me. And I donâ??t know if I want to feel that way. Itâ??s a strange tension.â?•

Silhouettes of two people interacting with a fish silhouette against a textured backdrop, illuminated b
Shadow Play in *Western Minerals and Their Origins*. (Photo courtesy of Footpath Theatre Co.)

Lind describes the change as urgency. â??At the Fringe it was, we just love this place, and maybe in the back of our heads there was a bit of a conservation message,â?• he says. â??As things get more dire, the narrative and the relationships are still important, but theyâ??re in service of this larger message about a place we love.â?•

Johnson is careful to say the new ending isnâ??t a turn to activism. Plays organized around a message, he argues, often keep audiences at a distance. â??Itâ??s difficult to connect on a human level with a message,â?• he says. â??Itâ??s much easier to connect with other humans, and then the message is incidental to that experience.â?• So they kept the siblings at the heart of the story and changed where the ending leads. â??We wanted to end it with momentum, this sense of going out,â?• Johnson says. The response they heard most often was the one they hoped for: I want to go to the canyons. Johnson and Lind see that shift as a reflection of their growth as creators.

â??If thatâ??s what we were able to elicit, the show is a success for us,â?• Johnson says. â??We canâ??t make people love these places, but we can make people remember how much they love them. Ideally, people start to understand why itâ??s important that these places are preserved and not exploited for their resources. Thereâ??s a deeper resource thatâ??s harder to put into a container, and itâ??s much more precious and much easier to lose than what weâ??d gain.â?•

The companyâ??s unofficial mission, Johnson says, is to bring the outdoors onstage. He admits thatâ??s a little ironic for an art form that happens almost entirely indoors, and that part of the appeal is the challenge. â??Itâ??s really interesting as a task, as a problem,â?• he says. â??How do you make a canyon appear on stage?â?• But the goal goes further: telling stories that make people care, remind them that they care, â??or make people feel seen for caring.â?•

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> *â?? Connor Johnson*

Lind has noticed that the moments audiences remember most are the big theatrical images of nature, not a single line or scene. â??People will remark on a song or a character interaction,â?• he says, â??but by and large itâ??s these grand, sweeping things that stick out to them, like the big canyon wall.â?•

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The pull of risk

The playâ??s emotional power still comes from its people. When I brought a friend to the Kingsbury production, he walked out reminiscing about climbing mountains with his sister. Memory creates the pathos, even when the audienceâ??s memories are different from the charactersâ??. Footpath has heard similar stories. Some audience members told the company they needed to call a brother or sister. One man, an outdoor guide, has returned for multiple versions. He has lost friends in the backcountry, including one in a flash flood.

â??Living here in Utah, and in the West in general, where being outside is such a big part of our lives, weâ??re all within one or two degrees of separation from someone whoâ??s had these experiences,â?• Lind says. â??And yet itâ??s important to us to keep going back to these places and engaging with them, even if thereâ??s an inherent risk.â?•

That tension runs throughout the play. It shapes the siblingsâ?? relationship and the shadow their father casts over it. The questions are simple: Why do people keep going back? And how much risk is too much?

Johnson, who calls himself â??a bit of a chicken,â?• is especially interested in Rion. â??Understanding the psychology, the sort of brain that does that, is really fascinating to me,â?• he says. He points to the current cultural attention on climbers like Alex Honnold and to a recent documentary about Dean Potter. â??Itâ??s just a great character. Itâ??s endlessly fascinating. I want to write more.â?•

> A couple lying together under a makeshift tent illuminated by a lantern, sharing a relaxed moment. Connor Johnson as Rion, and Jessica Graham as Ari. (Photo courtesy of Footpath Theatre Co.)

The sound of an echo

The music changed as much as the script. The Fringe production had a live electronic score and one guitar. The Kingsbury version had a full set of songs, with a regional sound that fit the landscape. Lind gives much of the credit to guitarist Max Bastiani, who came back this year with four new songs. â??He has this immense gift for songwriting,â?• Lind says. â??When we approached him about being in the show again, he said, â??Oh yeah, also Iâ??ve written four new songs.â?? And we said, â??Well, you have to put these in the show.'â?• Bastiani also has a deep, rich voice that the company clearly loves.

> **â??When youâ??re in a canyon, you get these very small reflections of your own voice.â?•**
> *â?? Harrison Lind*

Lind created the ambient score and synthesizer work underneath. He describes the two layers as serving different purposes. â??The abstract ambient sound was a cushion that lifted the show up,â?• he says. â??The written songs are what ground it. They give it its heart, and maybe some of its laughter.â?•

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He also believes songs make audiences trust a show. â??Itâ??s very rare in your day that you listen to people sing a five-minute song,â?• he says. â??But you hear people talking all the time. Even if the songs are non-narrative and donâ??t propel the story forward, they tell you something about the character and the relationships. It adds this richness.â?• Itâ??s something Footpath wants to keep in future shows.

The scoreâ??s signature is an echoing whistle that connects the playâ??s timelines. It came from a correction. For the early versions, Lind tried to build a full desert soundscape, then realized on a later trip that the desert is mostly quiet. â??Thereâ??s not a lot of insect sound, not a lot of animal sound, not even a lot of wind, like in a forest,â?• he says. â??But when youâ??re in a canyon, you get these very small reflections of your own voice.â?•

â??If thereâ??s one other sound I could have added,â?• he says, â??itâ??d be the very occasional plane way overhead.â?•

> **â??Weâ??re a little too restless to not reinvent ourselves.â?•**
> *â?? Harrison Lind*

Whatâ??s next

The Kingsbury run will probably be the last in Salt Lake. â??There are only so many times we can ask our friends and family to see the same play,â?• Johnson says, laughing. Their next local project, he says, will be something new.

For *Western Minerals*, the company hopes to tour, though Johnson admits theyâ??re still figuring out how. Heâ??s drawn to bringing the show to audiences with no direct connection to canyon country, while recognizing a case for performing it closer to home. A fourth version, if it happens, will likely be

very different again. For Footpath, thatâ??s the point.

About Footpath Theatre Company

Based in Salt Lake City, Footpath Theatre Company brings the outdoors onstage. It was founded by Jessica Graham, Connor Johnson, and Harrison Lind, three Utah natives and University of Utah theatre alumni. The company began with *The Wreck of the Queen Thomasina*, a rhyming-verse pirate play that premiered in Brooklyn in 2022 and went on to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2023. Its love letter to southern Utah, *Western Minerals and Their Origins*, has been rebuilt for each of three productions: the Great Salt Lake Fringe in 2024, Salt Lake Acting Company in 2025, and Kingsbury Hall in 2026, presented by UtahPresents. Learn more at footpaththeatreco.org.

First Round: 2024 Great Salt Lake Fringe

- **Rhetorical Review, â??Unearthing the Psyche: Western Minerals Shines with Desert Mystiqueâ?•** by Keolanani Kinghorn (August 5, 2024). https://rhetoricalreview.com/unearthing-the-psyche-western-minerals-shines-with-desert-mystique/
- **Front Row Reviewers, interview with Connor Johnson** (July 23, 2024), a preview. https://frontrowreviewers.com/?p=23822

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Second Round: 2025 Salt Lake Acting Company

- **Utah Theatre Bloggers / Utah Arts Journal, â??WESTERN MINERALS Is a Gem Worth Discoveringâ?•** (July 2025). https://utartsjournal.com/926979/western-minerals-is-a-gem-worth-discovering
- **Front Row Reviewers, â??Footpath Theatre Companyâ??s Western Minerals & Their Origins Unearths Memory, Myth, and the Music of Stoneâ?•** by Jason and Alisha Hagey (July 6, 2025). https://frontrowreviewers.com/?p=26468
- **Rhetorical Review, â??2025: A Year Witnessing Performance, Community, and Careâ?•** by Keolanani Kinghorn (December 15, 2025). This is a year-end reflection, not a full review. It singles out the SLAC remount and notes that that I didnâ??t formally review it. https://rhetoricalreview.com/the-rhetorical-review-2025-a-year-witnessing-performance-community-and-care/

Third Round: 2026 Kingsbury Hall

- **BroadwayWorld, season announcement** (August 7, 2026). https://www.broadwayworld.com/salt-lake-city/article/WESTERN-MINERALS-AND-THEIR-ORIGINS-to-Open-UtahPresents-Season-20260807
- **15 Bytes, â??From Fringe to Kingsburyâ?•** (August 19, 2026), a preview feature. https://artistsofutah.org/15Bytes/from-fringe-to-kingsbury-utah-play-continues-to-evolve-with-each-new-stage/
- **Front Row Reviewers, â??Echoes in the Sandstone: Excavating Grief in Western Minerals & Their Originsâ?•** by Alisha Hagey (August 29, 2026). https://frontrowreviewers.com/?p=28096
- **The Daily Utah Chronicle, â??Local theater presents a U alumnus playâ?•** by Ashlee Astin (September 1, 2026). https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2026/09/01/local-theater-presents-a-u-

alumnus-play-western-minerals-and-their-origins/

- **The Utah Review, theater roundup** (September 2026). https://www.theutahreview.com/theater-roundup-footpath-theatre-companys-western-minerals-and-their-origins-the-rose-performing-arts-coalitions-nevermore-threepenny-theatre-companys-the-death-of-nero/

Official pages

- UtahPresents event page: https://utahpresents.org/event/utahpresents/western-minerals
- UtahPresents playbills: https://utahpresents.org/playbills/

Watch the Interview here:

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